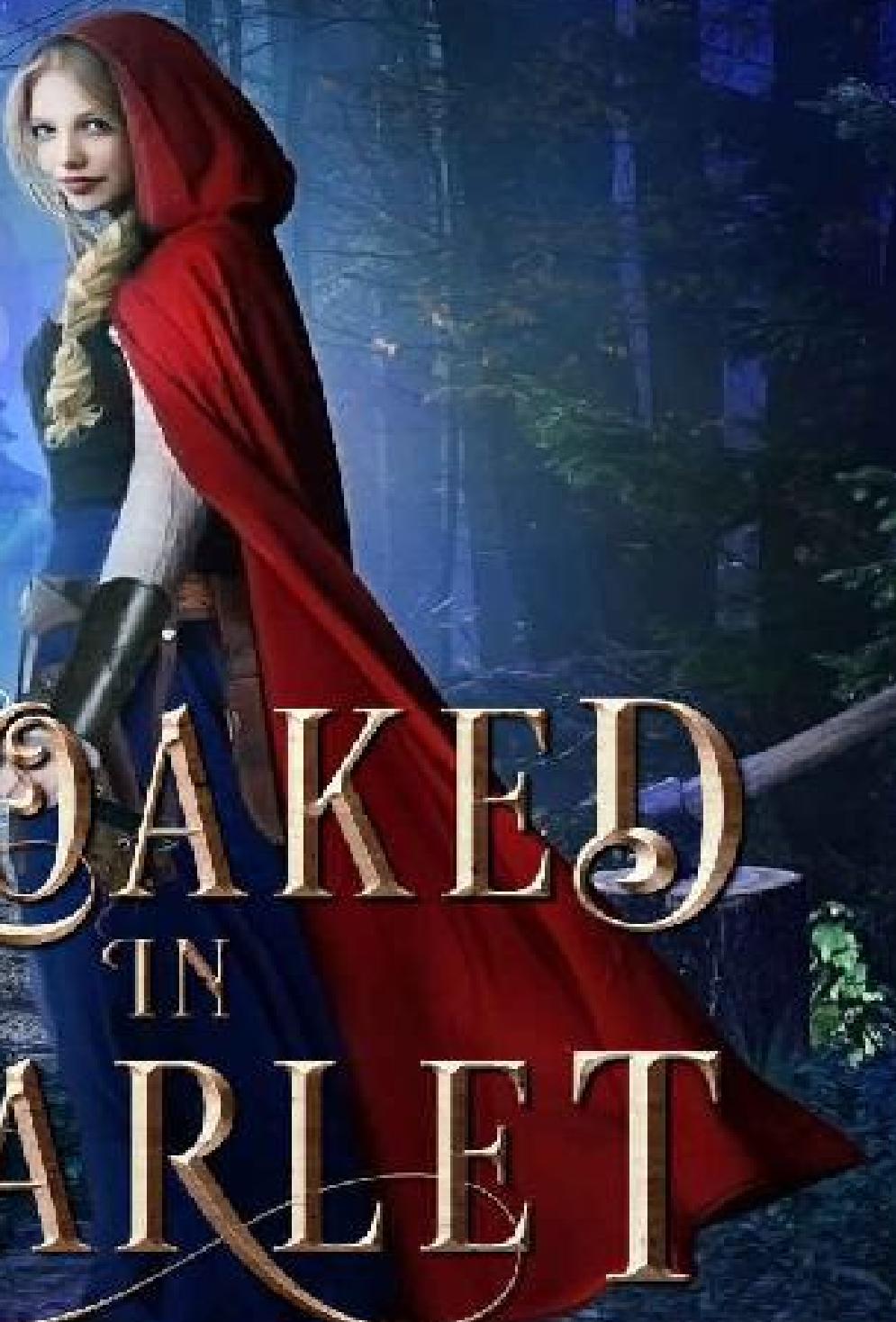


ANNETTE K. LARSEN



CLOAKED
IN
SCARLET

TALES OF WINBERG
BOOK TWO

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**CLOAKED
IN
SCARLET**

Annette K. Larsen

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ISBN: 9798404618969

Cover design by Karri Klawiter. Artbykarri.com
Edited by Jana Miller. the-writers-assistant.com

For the oddballs. For the ones who feel they don't fit in.
For the ones deemed too small, too big, too young, too old, too anything.

Do what you love.

1

Before

I was banking the kitchen fire for the night when I heard it—a barely audible thump at the back door. I sat back, rubbing the soot from my hands with my apron, and bent my head to listen.

It came again: a dull thud sounding against the thick wood. It was late, past midnight, and I couldn't think of any good reason for someone to be calling at the kitchen door. For a moment I thought perhaps I should fetch a guard or inform the housekeeper, Mrs. Braithwhite. I was only twelve, after all. But then I realized if someone were here to attack, they would hardly go through the trouble of knocking. Plus, I didn't like Mrs. Braithwhite.

A drizzle of rain had started earlier in the evening, and I could still hear the drops shushing against the windows. After hearing yet another thump, I threw my thick braid behind my shoulder and crossed to the door, lifting the latch to ease it open. I peeked out, not really expecting to see anything untoward, but still wary with the late hour and being completely on my own here in the kitchen.

I saw nothing but the black of night until a movement at my feet caught my attention. A lump of fabric rested to the side of the door, and a hand raised as if to give another pitiful tap on the wood. I threw the door open and fell to my knees in the doorway. The lump of fabric was a cloak enshrouding a waif of a girl slumped against the wall in an attempt to stay out of the rain. "Miss?" I pushed her hood back so that I could better see her. "What are you doing here?" Her adolescent face was pale and gaunt, her dark red locks plastered to her cheeks and neck. My heart lurched with pain at the pitiful sight. What had this poor girl been through?

She opened her eyes with some effort and though she looked at me, it seemed as if she didn't really see me. I touched her forehead. "Fever," I murmured to myself. I had to get her inside.

Pulling her wet arm over my shoulder, I wrapped my own arm around her back and hauled her across the threshold before kicking the door shut. She did her best to stand and walk, but she had no strength. It was a good thing she was thin. I was small for my age and couldn't boast any great strength, though I was quite compact due to my years of service.

Once I had her in front of the fire, she lay before it, stiller than she should have been, as I coaxed the coals back to life. "Where did you come from?" I asked, though my mind spun with many more questions. Why had she been wandering so late at night? Did she have a home? I knew I'd never seen her around Bridgefield before, so she certainly didn't work for Master Damian and Princess Marilee.

Perhaps she was from a neighboring estate and had become lost. Though why she would be wandering this late, I could not account for. The only reason I was down here was because Princess Marilee had been having difficulty sleeping and asked for some tea. How fortunate that I had returned to bank the fire when this poor soul collapsed at the back door.

Once the flames were growing, I turned back to the girl. Looking at her face in the firelight, I realized she was not only thin, but young, close to my own age, and her pale face contrasted dramatically with the red of her hair. I put my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to focus on

me. "What is your name?"

Her glassy eyes fought to focus on me, her lids blinking slowly. "Miriam," she answered, though her trembling made her voice shake.

"Why are you here, Miriam?" I asked. "Are you lost?"

"Hunter," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I need Hunter."

Hunter? "The footman?"

"My brother." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Please. I don't have anywhere else to go."

My heart squeezed. This poor girl. Her pale skin and nearly skeletal frame spoke of an ongoing illness.

"I'll get him." I stood and ran to the sickroom that was just down the hall. Perhaps I should have tried to get her in there, but it was all I could do just to pull her in from the cold. I grabbed a blanket off of the narrow bed and brought it back to drape over her. "I'll be back."

Grabbing my lantern, I slipped from the kitchen and made my way to the servants' quarters. I wasn't familiar with where each of the servants slept, certainly not the men, but I did know which room was Hunter's. I was far more familiar with Hunter than I should have been. I had noticed him the first day that he came to work at Bridgefield. He was several years older than I was. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. There was something about him—his smile and his kind eyes—that brought a bit of light into this dark house.

The house wasn't actually dark. It only felt that way. There had been a bit of light when Princess Marilee had first arrived after their marriage, but then her light had started to dim. Because of Master Damian. Because of Mrs. Braithwhite. Because of this house.

So Hunter's arrival three months ago had felt like a much-needed breath of fresh air. It was difficult not to be distracted when he was around. I wanted to watch him and soak up his good humor.

My fascination was not reciprocated. In fact, I doubted that Hunter had any idea that I even existed. At least I could do this for him though. The girl in the kitchen was his sister, and she clearly needed him right now.

When I reached his door, I hesitated for just a moment before giving three sharp knocks.

After only a moment, he opened the door with mussed hair and far less clothing than I should have been privy to. It took him several moments to clear the confusion from his eyes. "Yes?"

I shook myself from my momentary stupor. "Your sister" was all I managed to get out.

He was suddenly far more awake. "Miriam is here?"

I nodded. "She's ill." I hoped that would be enough of an explanation. I knew that my few words frustrated some people, but I could never seem to push out more than a few at a time. More words meant more people who could hear me and more opportunities to get into trouble.

He turned away, not bothering to close the door as he grabbed for a pair of trousers and slid them on. "Where?"

"Kitchen," I answered, averting my eyes.

He pushed past me, hurrying down the corridor while still tucking in his shirt.

I hurried to keep up with him since he had not taken the time to light a lamp of his own. We moved swiftly but quietly. Years of service had taught us both to move without drawing attention to ourselves. Our footsteps whispered across the woven rugs and down the steps leading to the kitchen. Reaching the bottom step, Hunter ran the length of the room and fell to his knees in front of Miriam.

"Miri?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Hunter. I'm sick. They wouldn't let me work anymore because I'm sick."

"I know, Miri. I know." He picked her up, cradling her in his arms, no doubt getting his own

clothing wet with the effort.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"We have to get her back to my room."

"Sickroom?" I gestured toward the hallway.

He shook his head. "She's not employed here. Mrs. Braithwhite would never allow her to be here, much less use the sickroom."

I nodded, knowing he was right. The housekeeper would not bend the rules for Miriam, no matter her plight. Mrs. Braithwhite had been unyielding and unforgiving since I'd come to Bridgefield after my parents died a year ago. Harboring someone who didn't belong would be out of the question.

We retraced our steps, but at a slower pace. I entered his tiny room, holding the lantern aloft as he placed his sister in his own bed. I shut the door behind me, anxious to have Miriam out of sight.

"Why didn't you come to me earlier, Miriam? Or at least send me a message?" His whisper was part desperate worry and part fear of discovery.

"I thought I was getting better. And then when they let me go, I couldn't very well find a messenger." I could see her body already relaxing into the warmth and comfort of the bed, though she continued to quiver with fever.

He sighed. "Last week your fever was gone. When did it return?"

"Today."

"That's why they threw you out?" His voice sharpened with indignation.

She shook her head. "It was after they tossed me out. They had already given me four days to rest, but when I tried to return to my work, I couldn't do it quickly enough. I didn't have the strength." Another bout of tears overtook her. "I truly tried. I really did, but I couldn't haul the buckets of water up the steps. They said I had to go if I couldn't do the work."

"Oh, Miriam," Hunter murmured as he brushed her hair back from her damp head.

"I was going to go into the village, see if I could find some work there, but then I realized the fever was coming back. That's why I started walking here. I knew I didn't have a choice anymore. I'm sorry, Hunter. You shouldn't have to take care of me."

"You're never a bother." He leaned his forehead against hers. "Rest. I'll be back soon." He stood and gestured for me to follow him out into the corridor.

He leaned against the door, closing his eyes for a moment before looking at me. "Please give me some time to sort this out before you inform Mrs. Braithwhite."

I blinked in surprise. "I won't tell."

He looked genuinely confused. "You won't?"

I shook my head. "I'll help."

"Why would you wish to help?"

"You need it," I said, lifting one shoulder. "She needs it."

His brow raised. "I'm surprised you'd be willing to risk your position by stooping to subterfuge."

I smiled to myself, thinking of the times I'd helped Aunt Beatrice get things for Princess Marilee that her husband would not allow.

He took my lack of response in stride and dragged his hand over his face. "I'm certainly in no position to refuse help." He let out an exhausted sigh. "She keeps trying to work before she's fully recovered. What she needs is to rest, but of course no one wants to give a servant a free room while she recovers for possibly weeks."

"She's sick often?"

He gave a solemn nod, his shoulders heavy. "The past six months, it seems as if she's sick more

often than she's healthy."

My eyebrows pinched together. "So they threw her out?"

"She hadn't worked there for long, so she didn't get a chance to prove her worth before she fell ill."

I chewed on my lip, then asked, "Your parents?"

"Long gone."

I swallowed, absorbing the hard facts, then looked at him, waiting for him to ask something of me. I could be useful. I could if he'd just give me a chance.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair, then pulled on a handful before looking to me again. "Can you get food? I'm sure she needs to eat and drink."

I nodded.

"We'll need rags and water to keep her fever down." He hooked a hand around the back of his neck, trying to think like a nursemaid when he was just a brother who cared. "Her clothes are wet and dirty, but I don't know where I would get a clean night dress for her."

"I have one."

The shock on his face was almost comical. "Are you certain?"

I nodded again.

He looked a bit bewildered, his head shaking back and forth. "I don't even know your name."

I tried not to let that bother me and simply answered, "Emeline."

"Emeline. I don't know how to thank you."

I looked away, embarrassed. "It's nothing."

He didn't reply, and when I convinced myself to look up at him, a ghost of a smile flitted across his mouth.

I took a deep breath. "I'll...be back." With the food and the nightdress, but, "You can get rags and water?"

He gave a firm nod and we both went about our designated tasks.

I returned with one of my nightdresses draped over my arm and a bowl of warm broth in hand. I vacillated between raising my fist to knock and reaching for the latch to let myself in. Had Hunter returned yet? If so, did he expect me to let myself in, or to maintain appropriate formalities and knock? I knew he needed to keep Miriam's presence a secret and my knocking could potentially be heard by someone.

I huffed in annoyance at my own nervousness. Hunter had referred to this plan as subterfuge, so he couldn't be too angry if I left formality by the wayside. I reached for the latch, but the door opened before I touched it.

I jumped, struggling to keep the broth from spilling as I recovered from the fright of having Hunter suddenly appear in the doorway. He wrapped his hand around my wrist, trying to steady the bowl.

"My apologies."

I tried my best to smile my forgiveness.

He took the bowl from my hands. "Come in." He stepped back.

I dipped my head, keenly aware of the fact I was being invited into a room where I should not be allowed. I felt like an intruder.

There was a basin of water and some rags sitting on a chair that was pulled up beside the bed. Miriam lay in the bed, her eyes blinking slowly open and closed, on the verge of sleep. Hunter closed the door and I held out the nightgown.

He took it, nodding in thanks then looking over to Miriam. His eyes darted from her to the

nightdress and back again before he started rubbing the back of his head.

Right. I reached to take the garment back. "You go." I nodded toward the door.

He released a breath, relief rolling off of him. "Thank you." He gestured toward Miriam. "For more than just...for everything." He shoved a hand into his hair and pulled. "I'm glad you're the one who found her."

"Me too." I twisted the nightdress around one hand. "Her knock was quiet."

"That's what scares me." His eyes took on a haunted look and I knew what he was thinking. It was the same horror that had run through my own head. What if I hadn't been in the kitchen? Would we have found Miriam's body by the door in the morning, after it was too late?

He stared at Miriam, traumatic what-ifs no doubt running through his head. When he finally looked back at me, I tried to give him a reassuring smile then nodded toward the door.

One corner of his mouth lifted the faintest bit and he let himself out.

Miriam was awake, if only just, but I was able to get her out of her apron dress and chemise and throw the dry nightdress over her head.

She fell back onto the pillow with a sigh. I tugged the dress down to cover her legs then pulled the blankets back in place. "Don't sleep. You must eat."

She nodded and I went to open the door. Hunter looked up from his pacing and hurried over. He stepped in and I stepped out. "Be sure she eats," I said as we passed each other. It was uncomfortable, me giving him orders, but I didn't want him to think that letting her sleep would be better.

He looked at me, his gaze heavy in the silent moments that passed. "Thank you" was all that he said, but it felt like more than just words.

I nodded in acceptance and he surprised me by taking my hand and bowing over it. The action left me frozen in surprise, but he went immediately to pick up the bowl and didn't notice how much his gesture had affected me. I closed the door behind me, my feet moving slowly over the stone floor as I made my way back to the kitchen to bank the fire once again before climbing the stairs to my room. I worried for Miriam and her health. I worried for Hunter and the responsibility that now lay on his shoulders. And I worried for both of them should they be discovered.

2

The next morning, as I was helping the cook to clean up after breakfast had been consumed by both master and servants alike, I secreted away two rolls and a bowl of porridge, determined to get them to Miriam somehow. I would have to hope that I would come across Hunter soon, because there was no way I could make an appearance in the men's boarding hall in the middle of the day.

Once everything was tidied, I thought I might have a few minutes to go in search of him if I was very careful.

And then Mrs. Braithwhite entered the kitchens.

"Ma'am," said the head cook with a curtsey.

I grabbed the rag I had just discarded and proceeded to reclean the counter in front of me without looking up. Everyone knew that I was quiet and kept to myself. Mrs. Braithwhite had no reason to address me directly and thus never had. So all I had to do was keep my head down and weather the storm that she brought with her.

"Master Damian's breakfast was only lukewarm when it was presented to him this morning. What will you do to remedy the situation?"

The cook bowed her head in deference. "My apologies, Ma'am. I'll make certain that our timing is more precise on the morrow."

I rolled my eyes. Breakfast had been brought up when Princess Marilee had arrived in the dining room on time. If Master Damian's food had been cold, it was because he was tardy, despite the fact that he demanded punctuality from both his wife and his servants. Of course we couldn't say such a thing to the tight-lipped, straight-backed housekeeper. In her eyes, Master Damian was nothing short of a god. He could do no wrong.

"See that you do" was Mrs. Braithwhite's condescending reply. "There are plenty of cooks to be had in the region, after all." I heard the tell-tale sound of her spinning on one foot before exiting the room.

Cook gave a sigh. "She can never resist a good threat," she muttered before returning to her work.

I smiled a little at her mettle. We all hated Mrs. Braithwhite, but most weren't willing to actually say anything about it. The housekeeper displayed an almost sycophantic dedication to Master Damian, justifying her own cruel behavior so long as she did it in his name.

I retrieved the rolls and porridge, holding them in one arm and covering them with a towel before going above stairs. I wasn't supposed to be anywhere but in the kitchens, so I had to be quick.

I was lucky. Hunter was stationed in the large corridor near the entryway. I stayed close to the wall, but drummed up the gumption to overcome my innate shyness and call out in a whisper, "Hunter!"

He cut his eyes in my direction, maintaining his stiff footman's bearing, then walked calmly and efficiently back to where I stood. "What can I do for you?" he asked with his hands behind his back.

"Can you leave your post? For your sister." I moved the towel enough to reveal my offerings.

Despite his effort to maintain his professional manner, I saw his shoulders sink in utter relief.

"Thank you," he breathed. "I didn't know how I was going to get something for her without causing

suspicion.” He held out his hands, eagerly accepting the items as I transferred them to his arms, laying the towel over the top so that anyone who saw him would only see an indistinct bundle of cloth.

“Go quickly,” I said.

He nodded and left without another word, walking only a little faster than his usual controlled footman’s stroll. He rounded the corner that led to the servants’ stairs and I heard his feet pounding up the steps.

Good. Miriam would get some food in her belly and I could stop fretting. Aunt Beatrice always teased me, saying that I never felt at peace unless everyone around me was well fed.

She wasn’t wrong.

I turned back toward the kitchen, jumping nearly out of my skin when Cecily came out of the drawing room.

“I’m sorry,” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” She flicked one of my braids. “What are you doing wandering the corridor?”

A blush flamed immediately to my cheeks. “I...” I had no ready answer. Hunter’s secret was not mine to share, and yet I did not keep secrets from Cecily. She was practically a sister to me.

“Goodness,” she said, giving me a quick hug. “I’d better not ask any more or you might burst into flames.” She drew back and gave me a smile. “Whatever it is, you know I’m happy to help if you need it.”

I nodded and scurried off to the kitchen.

Two days later, as I was going in search of Hunter once more, I stopped short as I entered the corridor. Mrs. Braithwhite was standing just in front of Hunter, who stood straight and tall, but paler than usual.

“No answer?” Mrs. Braithwhite prodded. “You’ve been seen abandoning your work several times a day and you don’t want to offer up an excuse?”

Oh dear. I pressed myself deeper into the shadows.

Hunter swallowed. He was young for a footman, and clearly not a good liar. “Part of my job is to run and fetch things, ma’am.”

Her eyes narrowed in a way I knew was dangerous. She didn’t speak right away and I saw sweat beading on Hunter’s forehead. “Well,” she finally said in rigid, clipped tones. “Let us both hope you are telling the truth.”

She turned and walked away, head held high, her wrinkled, thin neck stretched to its limits.

Hunter closed his eyes. I could see the fear and strain in his face. He also looked exhausted, likely from being up through the night, caring for his sister and sleeping on the floor of his tiny room. Closing his eyes was the only sign of fatigue that he allowed himself. Footmen did not do anything so indecorous as rubbing their eyes.

I walked silently closer, then stood across the corridor from his position, waiting for him to notice me.

He finally took a deep breath and opened his eyes, blinking with surprise when he saw me. Then he looked down and noticed the bundle in my arms.

He shook his head slightly. “I can’t leave my post. Will you take it to her?” he asked quietly.

I immediately drew back. “She’s in the men’s dorms,” I said in a panic. “I cannot.”

“Why?”

“Someone will see me.”

He thought quickly. “Tell them you got lost.”

I shook my head. "I don't get lost."

I could see his mind churning. Looking for an answer. I did the same. There had to be a better way to handle the situation. If she were anywhere else in the house, I would have had little trouble bringing her food, or even helping to care for her. But I could not be caught near the rooms of the male servants. Mrs. Braithwhite had very strict rules about servants dallying with one another.

The only other possible safe place for Miriam might be...

"My room," I said the moment the idea popped into my head.

"What?"

"Move her to my room—"

He was already shaking his head.

"I could care for her."

"That's not your responsibility."

"No one ever misses me."

My statement made him look strangely sad, which confused me. I'd only meant to point out that while his absence from his post was bound to be noticed, my small presence in the kitchens was rarely noted.

He shook his head again, his jaw set. "I can't ask you to do that. I need to get her out of here. We need to find work in the same household. But I can't go running off looking for another job. I'll lose this one."

"Ask Mr. Tennsworth."

"What?"

"The groundskeeper," I said, doing my best to push the explanation past my lips. "He knows the neighboring estates."

He blinked. "Is he trustworthy? Or is he loyal to *her*?" He threw his head in the direction Mrs. Braithwhite had disappeared.

"He would help."

He looked unconvinced, but at the same time I knew he would do it. Because he was right. This wasn't the right place for him and Miriam. They needed something else.

I set the bundle of food on the long table against the wall, tucking it behind a large vase. "Get this to her soon. Talk to Tennsworth." I left in a hurry. I'd done what I could and exhausted my supply of both bravery and words.

It took a few days, but Mr. Tennsworth came through. He had a friend who ran the stables of a man in a neighboring village. His friend was looking for another groom, and his wife, who ran the kitchen, needed extra help. They were lower positions than they had held before, but it was work, and they would be together.

Miriam's fever had broken yesterday, but she was still terribly weak. Mr. Tennsworth said the man and his wife were good, kind-hearted people and would give Miriam time to recover so long as Hunter went right to work.

I had to hope it was true.

Hunter didn't give notice. We each kept the situation to ourselves, deciding that having him disappear in the middle of the night was the simplest solution and the least likely to reveal Miriam's presence.

I returned to the kitchen after everyone was in bed and waited there, wrapped in the worn grey cloak my mother had given me, my most prized possession. Several blankets were stacked on the

bench next to me and a single lantern burned low on the table.

Hunter came in several minutes later, carrying Miriam in his arms and a pack on his back which likely held all his worldly possessions and Miriam's as well.

"I can walk," Miriam mumbled.

"Save your strength. We need you to get well," he said as if it were the hundredth time he'd said it. Maybe it was.

I situated one of the blankets around Miriam, trying not to be intimidated when I tucked it between her body and Hunter's chest. Then I took the lantern and led the way out to the stables, the flame burning so low that it barely lit our path.

Mr. Tennsworth had a small wagon that he used around the grounds. It was hitched to a horse and ready to go when we reached the back side of the stable.

"I can't thank you enough," Hunter said to Mr. Tennsworth as he set Miriam in the bed of straw spread in the wagon. "I don't know why you're going to all this trouble for me, but you have my eternal gratitude."

"You're taking care of your family." Mr. Tennsworth gave a shrug. "If I can help, I'm happy to. I know this household is rough on some."

A snort nearly escaped me. It was rough on most, and I was sad to know that Hunter was going to leave and take his optimism and good humor with him. I just hoped this next job would be one where he could stay and where he and Miriam could both find some normalcy.

I slipped past Hunter, piling the extra blankets on top of Miriam. The last thing they needed was for her to catch a chill and have her fever return. I also tucked a large bundle of food beside her—breads, cheeses and nuts that I could only hope wouldn't be missed in the morning. Mr. Tennsworth would be gone most of the night traveling to and returning from the neighboring village. The least I could do was feed him.

I stepped back, knowing they needed to get moving. The longer they lingered, the greater the chance of someone noticing that something was amiss. Mr. Tennsworth climbed onto the seat of the wagon, taking the reins in hand. Hunter was about to jump up beside Miriam but paused. Perhaps he'd forgotten something.

Then he turned back and wrapped me in an abrupt but firm embrace. "Thank you, Emeline," he said in a fierce whisper. He let go just as quickly and climbed into the wagon. Mr. Tennsworth snapped the reins and they were on their way before I had a chance to shake off my surprise.

When I finally turned back toward Bridgefield, I felt a new weight in my cloak. Reaching into my pocket, I withdrew a smooth piece of wood. Holding it up to the moonlight, I was able to make out the shape of a beautifully carved bird in flight. I held it to my chest, overwhelmed by the token of appreciation that Hunter had somehow dropped into my pocket. Then I set off toward the manor.

I'd sent the lamp with Mr. Tennsworth, so my return to the house was slow as I picked my way through the shadows.

Slipping back in through the kitchen door, I closed it silently behind me, only to turn around and find Mrs. Braithwhite standing in the middle of the kitchen, a pinched, vicious look on her face.

My breath seized in my chest, knowing my luck had run out. My days of fading into the background were over.

I shrank bit by bit as her eyes narrowed smaller and smaller until she spoke. "Were you out dallying with that footman?"

I choked on the air I was trying to breathe. I was twelve and she thought I was *dallying* with someone?

"Did you think I wouldn't notice the two of you whispering?" she said, taking a menacing step forward. "I had noticed his distraction, but I never thought you'd be *stupid* enough to take up with him."

Her hand lashed out so quickly that I was on the ground before realizing what was happening. My head rang and the entire left side of my face stung from the impact.

"Get up," she snapped.

I pinched my lips and did as instructed. I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the ringing in my ears, and after a moment managed to meet her eye.

She slapped me again, but this time I stayed upright, though tears stung my eyes.

She stepped so close that I felt her breath on my face. "It *won't* happen again, do you understand?" I blinked my eyes, trying not to sway where I stood. I nodded.

"Good." Her final blow knocked me to the ground again, lights popping behind my eyes.

I waited until my vision cleared and then looked up at her, wanting with everything inside me not to appear weak in that moment.

She just sneered down at me. "Now get upstairs, clean yourself up, and *do not disappoint me again*. I will not give you another chance."

She left the kitchen without a backward glance, the keys that hung from her belt jingling as she went.

The moment she was gone, I let out a sob, raising a trembling hand to my mouth. My fingers came away stained in blood from my split lip. I climbed shakily to my feet and sank into a chair, doing my best to cry quietly as I held a hand to my face, pressing the hem of my skirt to my lip with the other hand. I was glad that obeying her decree would be easy. It would be simple enough to stay away from Hunter now that he was no longer here.

Once I'd let myself feel the relief of having Hunter and Miriam away from this place, the dark feeling of helplessness sank into my skin, taking root in my bones. I hated this feeling. I hated feeling like I could blink out of existence and it wouldn't matter. I hated that Mrs. Braithwhite could leave me bruised and bleeding on the kitchen floor and my only choice was to take it.

3

Five Years Later

I'd stayed on the defensive, letting my opponent come at me with his sword, defending stroke for stroke without launching a counter attack. I wasn't as rash as I used to be. I'd learned to keep a clear head and bide my time until I found the right moment to go on the offensive.

"Be careful now," Falstone warned. "Don't let me back you into a corner."

I smothered a grin, not wanting him to know that I was fully aware of exactly where I was. When I was on the verge of hitting my back up against the manor wall, I feigned right before ducking beneath his arm and letting the force of his swing carry him forward until he almost collided with the wall.

Most opponents would have found their faces stuck to the stone, but Falstone was better than that. Still, he'd underestimated me, which was why when he turned around, I already had my sword at his throat.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "That was a dirty trick."

I just lifted one shoulder. "You taught me."

He grinned. "Yes, I did."

It had been five years since the night Mrs. Braithwhite had left me bleeding in the kitchen. I'd only had to suffer three more months of the witch-housekeeper's iron fist. Then Master Damian had died and I'd watched his widow, Princess Marilee, come alive—with fury and a will to live. She'd fired Master Damian's tyrant housekeeper and every other servant except for me, my great-aunt Beatrice, Cecily, and Mr. Tennsworth.

It was a fearsome thing to behold, Princess Marilee taking her life back. She'd hired only people she could trust, many from her own kingdom. Falstone was one of her personal guards from Dalthia, and he'd changed the trajectory of my life when he agreed to train me.

I was small. Always had been, always would be. And after helping Hunter and Miriam—my one real act of bravery—I'd learned how to make myself even smaller. Quieter. Almost non-existent. I believed that my size would never allow me the freedom to defend myself, so my only recourse had been invisibility. If I wasn't noticed, I could not be targeted. But Marilee hadn't let me fade into nothing. She, Cecily, and Aunt Beatrice had made me believe I could matter. And then Falstone had come into our lives. When I saw him taking time to instruct some of the children in the art of fists and swords, I considered that perhaps being small didn't mean I had to *act* small.

The first time I successfully parried a strike from Falstone was emblazoned on my memory. After believing so fully in the lie that I was helpless and weak, having a sword in my hand and knowing how to use it had been a revelation. I was small and not very strong, especially in the beginning, but I was also quick and agile. Falstone had been unfailingly encouraging in the four years he'd been training me, and he gave me a chance to take control of my life every time I picked up a sword.

I stepped back from Falstone and lowered my wooden weapon. "Had enough for the day?" I asked with a smirk. It's what he used to ask me, back when my strength didn't last even if I wanted to keep

training.

He laughed at my goading. "Yes, actually. I believe it's time I go find my wife." He tossed his own wooden sword to me, which I caught with ease. Falstone's real sword was sheathed at his side. No need to dull our blades or risk killing one another during our sparring sessions.

Falstone patted my shoulder as he passed by.

"I'm making the biscuits that Miles likes this afternoon," I called after him. Miles was two and a half and ravenous. "You should have Cecily bring him by."

"I'll pass the message along," he promised with a salute, heading toward the little cottage at the edge of the woods where he and Cecily lived.

As he left, I undid the ties that held my skirt out of the way. I'd added this simple modification to most of my skirts to allow me to fight. Two short ribbons were sewn to the front of my waistband, one in front of each leg. Two longer ribbons hung opposite them on the inside of my skirt, so that when it was time to fight I could tie them together, making my skirt knee-length in the front. Of course, that also meant that I'd taken to wearing boys' britches beneath my skirts. I couldn't fight with the range of motion I preferred if I couldn't ensure my modesty. People had called me bold and brazen a number of times since I'd started fighting, but my brazenness didn't extend any further than my need to wield a sword.

Once I'd taken my skirt down, hiding my britches, I returned to the kitchen.

I removed my sword belt when I stepped into the familiar dim light of the kitchen. Though I used wooden swords to practice, I'd gotten into the habit of wearing my sword belt whenever I was outside because it also held my knife. If I was going far from home, I would carry my sword, but closer to home, I only kept my knife on me. My skills would yield me nothing if I encountered a foe and had no weapon. I stashed my sword belt behind the kitchen door and grabbed my apron from the hook next to my old grey cloak. Princess Marilee had offered numerous times to buy me a new cloak, but I always refused. My mother had given me that cloak. She'd purchased it with coins she'd scrimped and scavenged away, and then given it to me when I was eleven, only three weeks before she and my father passed away. One could argue that it didn't fit me anymore, but I couldn't give it up. It worked well enough, and it reminded me of my mother's embrace.

The between maid, Nellie, had already started lunch preparations, and I joined her. Nellie and I worked well together. She split her time between working in the house and here in the kitchen as needed. She was a few years younger than I was and nearly as quiet as I used to be. So I understood her and we'd found a good rhythm, which made me wonder why Aunt Beatrice had hired more help. I'd been informed two days ago that a kitchen maid would be starting today.

Aunt Beatrice had moved up to the position of housekeeper last year and ran the household with grace and efficiency. I'd been promoted to the position of head cook only a year ago, when the old cook retired. I'd tried to tell my aunt that I didn't need another hand in the kitchen—Nellie was help enough—but she and the princess had insisted that with the growing household, a full-time kitchen maid was needed. I just worried that anyone new would struggle with the idea of a seventeen-year-old running the kitchen. The ancient butler, Gibson, still balked at it sometimes. I understood that I'd earned my position early, but I *had* earned it, and it was a little disheartening to have to prove it again and again.

The rhythm of baking soon caught me in its hypnotic snare. I sank into the comfort of flour puffing up into the air from the dough I was kneading, the clatter of washing dishes, and the staccato chopping of vegetables mingled with the sunlight that poured through the windows.

"Emeline."

I spared a glance toward the door that led to the rest of the house. Beatrice came in with someone trailing behind her. “Yes?” I answered, grabbing for a towel to wipe off my hands.

“I’d like you to meet our new kitchen maid,” Beatrice said in a voice that suggested she expected me to object.

I was no longer the quiet mouse I’d been a few years ago, and though no one would ever accuse me of being loquacious, I had learned to speak up and take charge when I needed to. So I took a deep breath and turned to introduce myself. Instead, the air was nearly knocked out of me as I recognized the new girl.

Her face was rounder, her complexion healthy, and she looked far from the frail girl I’d known for such a short time. But her bright red curls were unmistakable and I was certain of her identity. “Miriam?”

She blinked in surprise and then squinted her eyes as if to get a better look at me. “Yes?” she asked, clearly not recognizing me.

“I’m...I’m Emeline,” I said as though that would help jar her memory. “I found you at Bridgefield, when you—”

“Oh!” She covered her mouth with three fingers, obviously taken aback by our meeting. “You. Yes. Emeline. You...you saved me.”

I gave a shake of my head. “Hardly.”

Her own head rotated slowly back and forth, still trying to absorb the surprise. “I don’t remember much of what happened then, but Hunter told me what you did. He always spoke very highly of you.”

Had he? My stomach flipped over at the thought, but I set that distraction aside. “Are you well now?” Hunter had said she was prone to frequent illness.

“Much better now. And what about you? How did you end up here? I had heard that the Princess married Mr. Sutton—Sir James,” she corrected herself. “But we heard that all of her old staff had been let go.”

“Most were. The princess kept me and a few others with her.” I gestured toward Beatrice.

“Well,” she said, struggling for words for several moments before suddenly moving toward me. She wrapped her arms around me in a quick hug. “I’m really glad you’re here.” She pulled back.

Her relief at seeing someone she’d barely known five years ago was telling, and it made me wonder what her life had been like since she and her brother had left. “Why are *you* here? Did things with Mr. Tennsworth’s friend not work out?”

She waved my concern aside. “They worked out very well. But when the master died, his nephew took over and brought his entire staff with him. We made our way back here, inquiring about positions along the way, but most households weren’t hiring for even one position, much less two.”

Two? Did that mean that Hunter was here with her?

“Fortunately for her,” Beatrice said, jumping into the conversation, “we’re in need of additional help. And how lovely that the two of you know each other.” She clasped her hands together in her usual *what’s-next* gesture. “I will leave you to get reacquainted and show Miriam her responsibilities.” She bustled out, off to her next task.

I turned back to Miriam. “Well, shall we?”

“Please,” she said with a little laugh that sounded a lot like relief. “I’m eager to prove my worth.”

As I worked my hands into the biscuit dough, I let myself reminisce. Miriam’s presence had brought the past to the forefront of my mind. She was here and healthy, and that was partially because of me. The fact that I’d been able to help her and Hunter was part of the reason I’d been training all these

years. It wasn't just about being strong enough to take care of myself; it was also about having the strength to care for others. The carved bird that Hunter had gifted me still lay on my bedside table, a reminder that it was possible to make a difference in the lives of those around me.

I had just pulled the second batch of biscuits from the oven when Princess Marilee walked in, her rounded belly looking just as regal and refined as Marilee herself did. One would think that her waddling gait would have diminished her poise, but no, she was just as self-possessed as always.

"Emeline," she said, reaching out her hands as she walked toward me. "I need some of your biscuits."

I smiled. Princess Marilee was also just as in love with food as she'd always been. "Then you're just in time," I said, waving my towel over the pan so that the smell would waft over to her.

"Saint Emeline," she said as she wrapped me in her arms.

I chuckled, since my short stature and her very pregnant midsection made our embrace something of a fiasco.

She drew back and leaned down to better inhale the fragrance of my creation. I quickly grabbed a plate and set a steaming biscuit on it. Marilee took it with a "Thank you" and bit into it even before she reached her seat at the plain wooden table in the corner.

I saw the moment that she noticed Miriam's presence. Princess Marilee smiled wide, her eyes curious as she brushed a crumb from her lip. "And who is this?"

Miriam only blinked at the question, no doubt taken aback by the mistress of the house settling herself comfortably in the kitchen with the staff.

"This is Miriam," I answered for her. "She's come to help manage the kitchen for your ever-growing family."

Miriam's eyes widened even further, no doubt thinking my comment was meant to be cheeky or disrespectful.

The princess threw her head back and laughed. "Will miracles never cease? My Emeline has allowed another helper?"

"There's no need to taunt, Your Highness. You'll make Miriam think I am stubborn as a mule."

"You've guarded your domain like a sentinel ever since taking over for Diana. It's a miracle you ever let Nellie in here to help."

"I like things done right. I would think you of all people would appreciate that," I said with a dramatic nod toward the biscuit she raised to her mouth.

She only lifted her eyebrows at me before biting into it.

I shook my head, smiling to myself. Her casual demeanor and deep friendship with me and her other servants hadn't diminished over the years. Despite her marriage to Sir James and her re-entrance into the highest rungs of society, she'd stayed true to the bonds we'd formed at Bridgefield, when Beatrice and Cecily had done their best to protect her from Mrs. Braithwhite and I'd snuck her food when her husband kept it from her.

As Miriam shook herself from her stupor and went back to work, I poured Marilee a cup of tea. I was settling the kettle back on the stove when Oliver came in, ducking to fit his lanky frame through the door. He opened his mouth to speak but snapped it shut when he saw the princess sitting at the table. I gave him a reassuring smile. He was two years younger than I was, but he trained with Falstone and sparred with me when he wasn't working in the stables.

I nodded toward the pan of biscuits. "You're welcome to take one," I assured him.

He dipped his head, grabbed a biscuit and then backed out the door.

I just shook my head and turned to Marilee. "He's been doing that more and more lately."

“Doing what?”

“Wandering in to look for food.”

“Do you not feed him enough at meals?” she teased.

I set my hands on my hips. “You know very well that no one leaves my kitchen hungry. I’m guessing he’s just growing too fast to keep up.”

The door burst open and I jumped as two-year-old Miles flew into the kitchen. Cecily hurried along after him—her belly several months smaller than Marilee’s—and snatched Miles around the waist just before he was able to grab the hot pan of biscuits.

I was grateful that Cecily lived close enough to visit fairly often. Falstone still had his duties to Princess Marilee, but Cecily had left Her Highness’s service and now focused on keeping her son out of trouble.

“Patience, little one,” Cecily scolded, frustration and relief weaving through her voice. She pinned the squirming toddler under her right arm and grabbed a biscuit with her left before hauling the food and her son to the table. “Here.” She settled Miles on her lap and broke the biscuit into pieces with one hand, holding his hands hostage as she blew on them. “All right, now you can eat it.”

Miles wasted no time in shoving multiple pieces into his mouth.

Cecily looked up at us, blowing several strands of hair out of her eyes. “How in the world am I expected to chase two small humans when I can barely keep track of this one?” she lamented.

Her Highness lifted a shoulder. “Miles should be better at listening by the time your next is ready to run.”

Miles looked up at his mother, his last bite already in his mouth. “I want more,” he stated around the mouthful.

My smile couldn’t be contained as I set another biscuit in front of Miles and a cup of tea in front of Cecily. We used to gather for tea more than once a week. We’d sit out on the veranda or in Marilee’s sitting room and talk to our heart’s content. Such frequent gatherings were no longer practical. Marilee had a family now, including a three-year-old daughter, Seraphina, and another child due to arrive two months from now. And while Seraphina had a nursemaid to look after her, little Miles was never far from Cecily, who would also be adding another to her family before long. Beatrice was busy in her role as housekeeper, and I too had more responsibilities now that I was in charge of running the kitchen. But I loved these small moments here in my kitchen just as much as our more organized gatherings upstairs, which happened only once a month now. I was at home here in a way I’d never be sitting to tea in a princess’s sitting room.

Miriam continued to cast confused and awed looks our way. Princess Marilee must have noticed, because she spoke up. “Would you like to sit with us?” she invited.

Miriam’s eyes widened in shock, but she shook her head quickly and firmly before focusing her attention squarely on her work.

Aunt Beatrice hustled in as I was placing a few more biscuits and some slices of cheese on a plate. Apparently my pulling a snack from the stove had been a silent call for my favorite people to gather. I set the plate on the table and went back for two more cups of tea as Beatrice took a seat at the table.

She smiled up at me as I poured a cup for her. “How are you, Emmie?”

“Right as rain.” And I was. This place and these people. They were exactly what I needed in my life.

4

That first day, I discovered that Miriam was a deft hand at bread making. She was also quick to learn and eager to please in all her work. Her complexion was rosy, her face filled out, her curly hair a vibrant red. Seeing her strength and stamina gave me a tremendous amount of relief and assuaged any lingering worry I'd had about her health and well-being.

Her presence also provided me with more free time. When we had finished making and serving lunch, I decided to trust Nellie and Miriam with the cleanup. I took my sword belt from behind the door and latched it around my waist. I had been afforded few opportunities to practice with my real sword, and I needed to find the time. The harvest festival was a mere three weeks away and I was determined to enter the sword competition. I knew many would never understand my need to compete against others. It was a risk. I knew that. The competition required real swords to be wielded against one another. But that was why I had to do it, because if I ever encountered a true threat, I needed to know I was up to the task.

I had tried to compete last year. I had felt ready, but the moment I'd stepped up to the table to add my name to the list of competitors, I'd been laughed at, mocked, and then forcibly shoved out of the way to make room for all of the "real" competitors.

Men. That's what they had meant. When they spoke of real competitors, the only qualification was being a man. Heaven forbid a girl pick up a sword to defend herself.

That was why this year, I didn't plan to compete as a girl. I already had boys' britches, and I had high hopes that Oliver might be willing to lend me a shirt. I needed to speak with him about that as soon as possible, so instead of heading into the woods, I veered toward the stables.

I did my best not to look out of place as I walked through the stables, saying hello to Pryce, the stablemaster, and petting a few of the horses. I was also half-looking for Hunter, curious to see him again. But I didn't see him or Oliver in the stables, so I went out to the yard, walking the fence that surrounded the wide-open pasture that took up a large portion of Sutton land.

Fortunately, Oliver was in the pasture, and when he spotted me, he jogged over, leading a mare. "Emeline. What are you doing out here?"

Yes, it was quite odd for me to be roaming the grounds. "Just walking," I answered, a little too nervous to ask him for a piece of clothing right away.

He screwed up his face in confusion. "You don't just walk."

I laughed at that. "I'm trying something new now that I have more help in the kitchen."

"I didn't know you needed more help in the kitchen." He said this as though it were an oversight on his part, which seemed very odd. I must have been interpreting his tone wrong.

"I didn't either, but Beatrice insisted, so"—I lifted my hands from my sides in a little shrug—"I decided to embrace the reprieve."

"Do you think you'll be wandering out here more often?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said, looking out over the pasture and back toward the stables, trying to drum up my courage. "I actually wanted to ask you something."

He took a step closer. "Yes?"

"It's a favor," I started, wringing my hands. "And you can say no if you want, but I would be forever in your debt if—"

"Yes," he said before I had finished. "Whatever it is, I'm happy to help."

I sagged in relief. "Really?"

"Really."

I took a deep breath, hoping that was true. "I need a shirt."

His brow scrunched up in confusion. "A shirt?"

"A boys' shirt. Not right now. Not today. Just for...for the day of the festival."

His face scrunched up in thought, apparently unable to put together the puzzle of my words. "Why?"

I let out a defeated breath. "I..." How could I explain?

Then Oliver's confusion cleared from his expression. "You want to compete."

"Yes."

"They wouldn't let you last year," he stated.

"Because I'm not a boy," I said with only a hint of bitterness leaking into my words.

His smile was sympathetic. "Not real fair when you can beat most of us."

I leaned in, trying not to get my hopes up. "So..."

"Of course," he said as if it was the easiest answer to give. "I'll give it to you the day before."

I rose up on my toes as elation flowed through me. My plan was coming together. "Thank you, Oliver!" I threw my arms around him in a quick, grateful hug. "I'd better go. See you next time we spar."

"Maybe I'll finally best you," he called as I turned to go.

I grinned at him, proud that his words weren't empty flattery. "Maybe, but I'll make you work for it."

"Oh, I know," he murmured as the mare pulled on her bridle.

I gave a wave and headed toward the trees, ready to pull my blade out and practice.

This would work. If Oliver didn't object to my plan, then surely it wasn't so crazy.

I went deep enough into the woods that separated Sutton land from Bridgefield that no one would be able to see or hear me. Then, instead of tying up the front of my skirt, I simply took it off, leaving me only in the boys' britches that had become an essential part of my everyday wardrobe. If I was going to fight at the festival as a boy, I'd best get used to fighting in britches only. It felt strange but liberating, and as I practiced my maneuvers and my footwork, it became more and more natural. Several branches met a quick and untimely death, and I put more than a few gouges in the trunks of trees.

When I had worn myself out, I once again stepped into my skirt and headed back toward the house. My steps weren't hurried as I walked the path back to Sutton Manor, breathing in the fresh air as I prepared for another round of planning, baking and cooking. Aunt Beatrice was right. Having help would be good for me. I would get out of the house for more than just my sparring sessions with Falstone and the others.

As I neared the edge of the woods, the sound of an ax hitting a tree stump caught my attention and I wandered in that direction. Perhaps I could take an armful of wood back to the kitchen with me.

I didn't have to go far before seeing the servant cutting wood. He was facing away from me as he set the log and swung his ax, the movement smooth and powerful. When I came close enough that I could see his profile, I stopped in my tracks.

Hunter.

I stared. His face was almost serene, the strain of wielding his ax barely showing on his face. His hair was different, no longer held back in the tight ponytail of a footman. Now his brown waves were chin length and rather chaotic.

It was good to see him. A small knot that had resided in my chest for years now suddenly loosened. Odd, but I hadn't realized I'd been carrying that worry for Hunter until that moment when it let go.

I'm not certain why his presence caught me by surprise. I'd been half keeping an eye out for him since Miriam had indicated that both she and her brother had found work here. But he hadn't been taking meals in my kitchen, and I'd started to wonder if I had misunderstood what Miriam had said. There was also the worry that if I did see him, he might not recognize me. He might not live up to my memory of him, which was likely more than a little romanticized.

But seeing him here. Now. He looked even better than in my memory.

Hunter finally turned enough that he caught sight of me. He lowered the ax, letting it rest against the ground, catching his breath as he studied me. I thought I saw recognition in his eyes, but I couldn't be certain. Either way, I needed to say something. He'd caught me staring at him, and that would be mortifying indeed if he thought I'd come only to stare.

My hands flexed as I mustered all my courage—trying to remember that we had been something akin to friends when I'd helped him care for Miriam—and opened my mouth to say something.

But nothing came out.

Instead a wave of shyness I hadn't felt for nearly two years washed over me, heating my cheeks, making my scalp tingle, and rendering me mute.

He tilted his head, turning to face me more fully.

I tried again to speak, but the picture he presented overwhelmed me, the heat from my cheeks overflowing to cascade through my body.

He had filled out. A lot. He was no longer the lanky footman. The position he'd occupied as a groom for the past several years had earned him a broader physique, built with solid muscles.

My face flushed deeper as a wave of attraction washed over me. Saints, I hadn't expected that. I had fond memories of this boy, but standing in front of him now, I realized my memories had been very much about a *boy*. The person before me was most decidedly a *man*.

I needed to come up with something to say, preferably something light-hearted and normal, but at this moment, I would have been happy with any words making their way out of my mouth.

Instead, all I could do was attempt to stop my gaping and pull my gaze away from the hollow of his throat.

My mind was empty. I finally pulled my eyes from him, resisting the urge to curl in on myself in an attempt to disappear. Where was all the courage and confidence I'd acquired over the last years? If ever there was a moment when I needed it, this was it!

My eyes landed on the ax that rested at his feet and I finally succeeded in speaking. "You're a woodcutter now?" I asked. Though instead of saying it with head held high and voice strong, it came out as barely more than a squeak, which made me cringe at my own awkwardness.

Frustration washed over me. It was maddening to be sitting in this shyness again, my throat closed off. I had worked hard to grow my confidence and see myself as competent and capable. I'd worked tirelessly to string words together, to speak up in full sentences and let myself be heard. So what was it about him that sent me hurtling back in time to the awkward girl I'd been years ago?

"For the moment," he said slowly.

I managed to return my eyes to his face, though the effort felt herculean.

He was still studying me. "Yes, I'm the woodcutter right now, but that's not the position I was hired

for. I'm new here and need to earn my keep." He nodded his head in the direction of the stables. "Most of the time, I'm a groom."

So then, he didn't recognize me. I fell back a step, trying to tamp down the flush of my face and neck. Perhaps it was better that he didn't recognize me. With any luck, he would forget me the moment I walked away. "Well," I said, my voice shaking as I tucked some loose hairs behind my ears. "I just saw you and wanted to welcome you to Sutton Manor." I turned to go, desperate to return to the warmth of my kitchen, where I was comfortable and confident. Hopefully he would believe that I was just another servant trying to give him a warm welcome. I was several steps away when he called out.

"Emeline?"

I stopped, took a fortifying breath, and then turned back, fighting to keep my nervous breathing from running out of control.

He looked a bit more relaxed and a small smile curved one corner of his mouth. "It took me a moment to be certain, but it is you, isn't it?"

I nodded.

He looked me over, and I suddenly felt bad for the way I'd stared at him earlier. It was most uncomfortable to be under such scrutiny.

Finally a grin curved his lips. "I expected you would have grown taller."

His teasing allowed me to relax and I heaved a sigh of relief, grateful to feel my shyness dissipating. I rolled my eyes. "We can't all be giants," I argued, then let my gaze sweep over him. The strength had returned fully to my voice when I added, "You're not." It was true. Hunter was still only average height at best. That fact made me oddly happy. Though after I said it, I realized he might take offense. "Not that that's a bad thing, of course. I don't wish to disparage your"—I gestured toward him—"height." Now I sounded even more ridiculous.

He smiled. "Not to worry, my height's ego is not so fragile as that." He let his ax handle lean against the wide tree stump and ambled toward me, dusting off his hands. "I'm surprised to see you here."

The shrinking distance between us made my throat tighten again. *Deep breath*, I thought, reminding myself of the steps necessary for me to speak when my shyness wanted to silence me. Though I had a sneaking suspicion that this wasn't shyness at all, but simply a reaction to *him*. "Princess Marilee kept me on when she left Bridgefield."

He nodded. "You don't seem surprised to see me," he commented, though there was an obvious question in the statement.

I swallowed down my nerves. "I run the kitchen," I said, trying to rest comfortably in my confidence without crossing into vanity. "Miriam will be working for me."

His eyebrows jumped. "You run the kitchen?"

I nodded as pride swelled in my chest, while at the same time a twist of nerves tightened my stomach. Would he doubt my capability for such a thing? Plenty of people had before.

He just grinned like he was proud. "Well done. I'm certain that's no simple task."

I shrugged a little. "Sometimes it feels like the most simple thing there is. Cooking and baking have always made me happy."

"You're not as quiet as you used to be."

I shook my head. "No, not usually." My skirt was fisted in my hands as I poured all my nervous energy into its folds. I may have found my voice, but that didn't mean that conversing with *him* was easy.

"I'm happy to see you again." He did look happy. His face was open and excited as his eyes ran

over me.

"And you. I'm very glad that things worked out for you." There. That sounded more like me.

"Thanks to you."

His soft expression, full of gratitude, brought heat back to my face. "No, it was Mr. Tennsworth, really."

"Well, thank you nonetheless." He stepped back and took up his ax once more. "I suppose we'll be seeing more of each other now."

"I would imagine so." After all, most servants ate in my kitchen multiple times a day. That thought made my brow furrow. "You haven't been taking your meals in the kitchen," I observed.

"Pryce has been kind enough to invite me to eat with him and his wife."

"Ah, yes." I had forgotten that Pryce liked to do that with the new hands. He said it helped to get to know them early on so they'd work better with the others. "Well. Good luck with your duties."

"I imagine I'll be seeing you in the kitchen soon." He grinned at me. "Try to keep my sister out of trouble."

I shook my head even as I smiled. "No one makes trouble on my watch." I gave a little wave and went on my way, half mortified, half proud.

As I readied for bed that night, I couldn't help but pick up the carved bird, its wings so wide open that it looked as if it could embrace the world. Fierce and beautiful. I set it back down, tapping its little beak before climbing beneath my covers.

Waiting for sleep to claim me as I lay in bed, I tried to visualize different scenarios that might come up at the festival competition and how I could handle them. I imagined the weight of my sword in my hand, the confidence that it gave me.

Yet, as sleep crept closer, it wasn't visions of victory that drifted through my thoughts. It was Hunter.

I fell asleep with a smile on my lips.

I was distracted, which was most inconvenient when one was wielding a sword against an opponent.

I was barely able to parry and deflect Falstone's blow and he immediately stepped back, his brow furrowed in consternation. "Where is your head?" he asked.

"Here," I said defensively.

"No, it's not. You've been slow since we started."

"I'm fine," I said, determined to focus in. "Let's go again." Because I was fine. I had to be fine.

"Distraction is dangerous, Emeline."

"I told you, I am well." And to prove it, I went on the attack. I refocused, imagining how different my life might have been if I'd been able to stand up to Mrs. Braithwhite. What pain might I have prevented for Marilee if I'd had the strength? Could I have made a difference for Cecily when her fiancé had been threatening her?

Thoughts of those situations lent strength to my swing, but Falstone defended easily, looking almost bored. He did that to provoke me, I was sure of it. Unfortunately it worked, especially when my encounter with Hunter came to mind. In my frustration, I lost my precision and in only a moment, he had me backing up, making me strain to keep up with him. He'd been right. My wandering thoughts were not doing me any favors. I redoubled my efforts to gain the advantage, trying to put my focus on the task at hand, but Falstone spun his sword, catching my own close to the hilt and jarring it from my grip. It fell to the ground and I let out a cry of frustration even as I retreated.

Falstone continued to advance, twirling the wooden weapon at his side. "What now?" he prompted.

"That's not the end of the confrontation. Think your way through it. What's next?"

My glare was fierce, but it wasn't for Falstone. I knew full well that I was angry with myself, not him. All this trouble over a boy.

Maybe it was my thoughts of him that conjured Hunter. Whatever the cause, I was lucky that I saw him in time. He was running at Falstone's back, a look of fury in his eyes, a short ax in his hand.

"Look out!" I called.

It was a testament to Falstone's training that he barely flinched before pivoting on one foot and unsheathing his real sword in one swift move, raising it to meet the new threat.

I had one terrifying moment of worrying that Falstone's sword would find its way straight through Hunter's heart before the dull chink of metal wedging into wood stilled the air around me. Falstone's sword had cut into the handle of Hunter's ax and in one more move, Falstone had disarmed the new groom, pried his blade from its place in the ax's handle, and redirected his sword at Hunter's chest.

I leapt forward to grab Falstone's shoulder. "Don't!" I cried.

At the same time Hunter shouted, "Leave her alone!"

We all fell silent for the space of two heartbeats, maybe three, but it felt like a day as I froze in that tense and pulsing moment, waiting to see what would happen. Then I realized what *had* happened.

So did Falstone. "I am no threat to her," he said in his calm, controlled way before carefully lowering his weapon.

"No threat?" Hunter gaped, incredulous.

"We were only sparring," I assured him as I stepped into the space that separated them. "Falstone has been training me for years."

"You've—" Hunter's chest heaved and collapsed as I watched relief clash with his confusion.

"I apologize for causing such concern," Falstone spoke up. "Everyone at the manor is familiar with our training sessions, but it should have occurred to me that any new help should be warned."

"Yes," Hunter agreed, still sounding winded. "I think that would be wise."

Falstone dipped his head in acknowledgement and left us without another word. I blinked, wondering why he had abandoned our practice so abruptly. When I turned back to Hunter, he was studying me with his hands on his hips and his lips pinched together. His nostrils were flared as he breathed carefully, and I could see the pulse of his heartbeat in his neck.

A visceral need to move closer to him made my gut clench. I fought against it. Yes, he had been looking out for me, which was...appealing. And yes, he appeared to be everything that was masculine and attractive just now as he stood looking at me with such intensity and such concern, but that was no reason to be getting my *feelings* involved. He'd been a bright spot in my life all those years ago, and his return had me excited and twisted up inside.

Because I'd wondered about him. What it would be like to see him again and feel the sunshine that he seemed to bring with him. And now he was here, with his sunshine, so I suppose it was only natural that seeing him again would make me lose my sense a little.

That didn't mean that I had to give in to it, though. There was no need for me to fall to bits simply because a boy from a fond memory now stood in flesh and blood and rippling muscles before me.

I mentally slapped myself. *Muscles had no bearing on this situation!*

I swallowed and forced my eyes away from Hunter as I focused on returning my sword to the sheath that hung at my hip and letting my skirt down from its ties. "I'm sorry about that," I said before looking back at him.

His eyebrows scrunched together. "Sorry about what?"

"This...situation." So much for calm, grown-up words. "For frightening you," I clarified.

He pulled a hand down his face. "You certainly did that."

"Sorry."

He waved that off. "It's not your fault. I was just...caught off guard. Very, very off guard." His gaze fell to the sword hanging at my side. "You're an expert swordswoman now?"

I shook my head. "I certainly haven't earned that label."

He let out a little huff. "Well then, you are above any skill level that I would have expected or that I could hope to attain myself." He looked at me, probably waiting to see if I would object to that description. When I didn't, he continued. "It surprised me."

I lifted one shoulder. "It surprises most people."

His brow scrunched again as he studied me. "Because you are so quiet?"

"And small."

For some reason, that made him grin. "And adorable?"

"Oh, gracious." I dropped my eyes as my cheeks flamed. "Never that." I hated being seen as an adorable little girl when I was several years past my girlhood.

He tilted his head to look at me. "You're right. You've always been too fierce and independent to be considered adorable."

His frank observation took me by surprise. "And when did you come to that conclusion?"

"When you helped me save Miri. The only reason we got out of Bridgefield in one piece was because of you."

"You give me far too much credit," I said, wandering away from him and back toward the kitchens.

He fell into step beside me. "I don't think so. I think most people likely don't give you enough."

"Well." I cleared my throat in embarrassment. "If I am to receive any credit at all, then I should be getting on with my work."

"Can I walk with you?"

"I suppose." It was strange to be both comfortable and uncomfortable in his presence. We walked in silence before I plucked a topic from my brain to break it. "You should probably know, I'm not the only one that practices sparring."

He grinned. "Yes, I've seen the children with their wooden swords."

A smile curved my mouth at the thought. "Yes, the children do like to practice. But you'll no doubt see the older boys soon, some of them practically men, and they don't use wooden swords anymore. They've been training with Falstone just as long as I have. Some longer."

"Are they as skilled with a sword as you?"

"Tyson can outmaneuver me on occasion. Oliver has yet to get the upper hand. Gretchen and Ansel still need several more years of practice. They've only recently picked up a true blade. And Johnny tired of the sword and prefers wielding a staff."

He made a noise of interest. "I work with Oliver, but I don't believe I've met the rest."

"Ansel works in the stables as well, and no doubt you'll meet the others eventually. Though several don't work here. They come over from Bridgefield."

He looked off in the direction of Bridgefield, though the view was taken up entirely by forest. "Is the duke's family in residence there?"

"Very rarely. It's usually just the staff, keeping it up."

"Ah. I see. Well, I look forward to seeing their training. Perhaps you all would be willing to give me some pointers."

"Falstone is the one to ask for pointers."

"Then perhaps I had better make his acquaintance when I am not worried that he's attacking my

friend.”

My cheeks heated at his claiming me as a friend, and I was grateful we had reached the kitchen door. “Are you going to come in to eat now? Breakfast is still laid out.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve got morning chores in the stables first.”

“Well,” I said, doing my best not to show my relief. “I’ll set some aside for you and you can eat when you’re ready. Good day, Hunter.”

“Good day, Emeline.”

I slipped through the door, shutting out Hunter and all of his...Hunterness. I fought to cool the blush that had resided just under the surface ever since he’d interrupted my sparring. How strange to have my blushing awkwardness return with such fervor simply because Hunter had returned. I couldn’t decide if I should brace against it or embrace it.

5

The following day, I went to toss some old water out back and paused to watch as Johnny sparred with Marcus, who was the only one skilled enough with a staff to take him on. Even so, it wasn't Marcus's expertise, and he had found himself more and more on the defensive over the past six months. His position as one of Marilee's guards didn't lend itself to staff wielding. Johnny managed to catch Marcus in the stomach with the end of his staff.

Marcus doubled over, stepping back and coughing a few times. "I think it's time we gave you more of a challenge," he wheezed.

Johnny grinned. "Is that your way of saying you've had enough?"

Marcus straightened with a grimace and took a few more careful breaths. "That's my way of saying that you aren't going to encounter many people whose weapon of choice is a staff. I think it's time you learned to defend with a staff when someone comes at you with a sword."

Johnny stilled for only a moment, thinking through that scenario. Then he pulled himself up and raised his chin. "You're right. From now on that's what we'll do."

Marcus nodded. "Very good. But for now"—he took an abrupt swipe at Johnny—"let's finish this round."

They both fell back into the rhythm of sparring with intense focus.

If I hadn't grown up alongside Johnny, I might not have recognized him. At sixteen, he was a year younger than me but the top of my head didn't even reach his shoulder. He'd become Mr. Tennsworth's right hand. Nowadays, the elderly Mr. Tennsworth held the title of head groundskeeper at Bridgefield in name only. Johnny did the majority of the work.

That reminded me—I needed to go visit Mr. Tennsworth soon. Not today; I had too much to do, but perhaps tomorrow.

I watched Marcus and Johnny thrust, swing, and twist their staffs, almost mesmerized by the movements. Johnny's younger sister, Gretchen, stood to one side, shouting encouragement while she worked to tie up her skirts. She caught my eye and hollered over, "Have you seen Ansel?" The eleven-year-old was likely waiting for him to join her so they could go sword to sword. They were the same age and had been training alongside each other, competing to be the best, since they were seven.

"I haven't, but if I do, I'll send him out."

She nodded and turned back to watch her brother, who at that moment spun around before sweeping his opponent's legs out from under him, landing Marcus flat on his back.

I grinned but turned away, knowing I didn't have time to get caught up in the spectacle right now.
"Emeline."

I turned to watch Oliver jog over to me. "Good morning."

"Morning," he said, dipping his head. "Can I help you with anything?"

I smiled, a little bewildered by the offer. "No, I've got it well in hand."

"Right," he said, shrugging. "Maybe later." Then he hurried off.

His offer left me puzzled, but I didn't have time to wonder about it.

I slipped back inside, spotting Ansel right away. He had pilfered a chunk of bread and was just shoving the last bite into his mouth as he passed by me. "I'm going to win this one," I heard him mutter to himself before flinging the door open and charging out. I wished him well, knowing that Gretchen would put up a good fight.

I grinned, shaking my head in wonder at the happiness that so many had found here.

"They look happy." Miriam's words took me by surprise even as they echoed my own thoughts. I hadn't seen her standing close to the window, craning her neck to better see out into the yard even as her hands worked the dough that lay on the counter.

I stepped up across from her and sprinkled the counter with flour. I took a large section of dough from the bowl and started working it with the heel of my hand.

"I never imagined working in a place such as this," she murmured as she continued to stare out the window, her eyes far away.

"Don't let that fool you. There is still plenty of work to fill our days."

She shook her head, eyes still fixed outside. "I don't mind work. Not even hard work. My father always told me I was built for it."

That struck me as an odd thing for a father to say. "Was that his way of being encouraging?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's just something he said since I was young. That's neither here nor there, though." She finally turned to look at me, longing and perhaps even hope in her eyes. "It's just that I never thought my life would be more than that."

"More than what?"

"More than working to survive."

I nodded, knowing that there were too many in the lowest class who trudged through life without joy.

"But this house." She looked about, as if awed to be in this practical kitchen. "These people. The princess. Sir James. Falstone. *You*."

"Me?" I understood her being fascinated by the dynamic of this house. I'd never known a mistress of any house to treat her staff with the kind of genuine warmth and affection that Princess Marilee did. She was an oddity. A treasure. I, on the other hand, was just the cook.

But Miriam nodded with conviction. "You barely knew my brother. You knew nothing of me when I showed up at Bridgefield, but you helped us anyway."

"It was nothing."

"It was everything to us. And it didn't end up being nothing to you. Cecily told me about it. She told me what that housekeeper did to you because you helped." Concern swept over her face. "We cost you dearly."

I blinked as the pain of that night roared into my memory, sharp and fierce. It wasn't that specific memory that caused the lump in my throat, but the years of fear that surrounded it. "I was fine."

Her expression was folded into regret, gratitude, and humility. "You put yourself in harm's way for us."

"I ended up hurt because I was..." How could I word it? "I was doing what I knew was the right thing to do. That's all."

She looked at me with a sort of confused half smile. "You were what? Twelve? The same age I was. That wasn't nothing."

I chewed my lip, wanting to drop the subject and forget it altogether, but one question wouldn't leave me alone. "Does Hunter know?"

She shook her head. "I thought of telling him, but I couldn't. I know he feels responsible, not just for me, but for everything. I didn't want to add to that." She looked away as if ashamed, putting her finished loaf onto a tray.

A little breath of relief escaped me. I didn't want him to know what had happened. Because it wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just the way things had been.

"I could tell him if you would like," she offered.

"No!" I said too loudly, then quickly softened my voice. "No. Don't tell him. I don't want him to think I blame him. I don't." I'd worked so hard to overcome that one awful night and rise above it. The last thing I wanted was for Hunter to see me as vulnerable.

"Thank you," she said with relief.

I shook my head. "There is nothing to thank me for. I really don't want him to know."

She nodded, her gaze drifting back to the window as she sprinkled more flour onto the counter. "Do you think I could..." She trailed off, then grabbed another mound of dough as her brow furrowed.

"What?" I asked, placing my loaf onto the tray beside hers.

Her gaze darted to the window and back. "I just...it's nothing."

With the sound of young boys wielding wooden swords floating on the air, it wasn't difficult to guess the direction of her thoughts. "You want to learn?" I guessed.

Her eyes rose to mine but dipped to her work after only a moment as pink stained her cheeks.

"Falstone would be happy to teach you," I said gently, trying not to be pushy but wanting her to know it was easily done.

"What about you?" she asked.

I smiled. "I'm already a devoted student."

"I know that." She shifted her feet, pushing her hair off her forehead with the back of her hand. "I mean would *you* teach me?"

My hands stilled and my eyes widened in surprise. "Oh." The thought of teaching someone else had never occurred to me. "You want to learn from me?" Warmth flooded my chest at the idea that this girl would look to me for guidance.

"I don't know the others." The wariness in her eyes at that moment was telling. There was a reason she was staying inside, working away while most of the young workers engaged in swordplay. Miriam didn't trust the others. At least not yet.

I'd have to do something about that. "I'd be happy to."

Her face split into a grin as she returned to her work.

That evening, after Sir James and Princess Marilee had finished their meal, Miriam and I moved on to feeding the servants who filtered into the kitchen a few at a time, taking up bowls of stew and sitting at the table to eat. Some devoured their food in haste before rushing off. Others were content to stop a while and have a visit with the others.

These were the moments when I thrived. I loved the sound of my spoon hitting the side of the bowl while contented voices hummed in the background. I couldn't help but smile when someone came looking for seconds.

Once everyone had their fill, Miriam, Nellie and I worked to clean and put everything to rights.

Hunter was ensconced at the table with Marcus, Oliver and Ansel. My eyes kept cutting over to Hunter. I couldn't help it. Anytime he was close at hand, I felt it inside of me. It was like a pull on my heart—a flaxen cord attached to my ribs that tugged whenever he moved.

The feeling was a new one for me.

I got on well with the other servants, even those young men who were close to my age, but I'd never developed any deeper feelings for any of them. They were my friends, and some I even thought of as my brothers.

Even the connection I had felt with Hunter all those years ago was different than what I felt now. I'd been curious and perhaps even a bit besotted then.

Now? It wasn't just curiosity. It was more deep-seated than that. It was a want I felt down to my bones. It left me a bit terrified even as the candlelight reflecting in his eyes left me warmer than usual.

He grinned as he gave Marcus a hard time for the beating he'd taken from Johnny.

"I'm not too proud to admit when someone is better than I am," Marcus proclaimed, though his uncomfortable squirming indicated that he admitted it only with some difficulty. "Johnny is going to be a giant of a man, and with the way he's taken to that staff..." He shook his head. "Let's just say, I'm glad he and I are only sparring. And I'm grateful he has a job he loves so that he doesn't have even more time to practice."

"It's difficult for me to imagine anyone enjoying their work at Bridgefield," Hunter commented.

"Things changed a lot after Lord Rockwell died," Oliver commented, his eyes cutting over to me. Oliver had grown up here, at Sutton Manor, but he'd heard the rumors back then, and he'd heard Cecily and I discussing it often enough to know how it had been.

Hunter snorted. "That much is obvious. I can only imagine the fight Mrs. Braithwhite must have put up when someone tried to pry her away."

Oliver shrugged. "That's the princess for you."

"Hey," Ansel said, perking up with interest. "Have you heard there's been poachers on their land?" Hunter stilled. "Poachers?"

Ansel nodded emphatically, the idea of poachers translating to adventure in his eleven-year-old mind. "Mr. Kenton is going to shoot them if he ever catches them."

Marcus was more serious. "We were discussing it earlier today. Thus far it's only been on Bridgefield land, but if they're poaching there, on land owned by the duke himself, it stands to reason that they won't hesitate to move their efforts here."

"How long has this been going on?" I asked, the question pushing past my lips before I could think better of inserting myself in the middle of a conversation.

"Just this last week," Marcus answered. "Well," he hedged, "that's when they first realized. The gamekeeper says it might have been happening for far longer, but he only realized for certain a few days ago."

Uneasiness crept into the creases of my heart. I loved the woods that overlapped Sutton land with Bridgefield. I felt safe there. The idea that someone could be lurking there who didn't belong was more than unsettling.

Oliver caught my eye, and he must have seen my disquiet. "Mr. Kenton will take care of it," he chimed in. "He's more than capable as a gamekeeper. I have no doubt the problem will be dealt with in short order."

I forced my hands to keep working, trying to let Oliver's reassurance chase away my unease.

Soon the sound of the wooden chairs scraping against the stone floor filled the room and they filed out the back door, Ansel and Marcus both giving me a nod and a word of thanks. Oliver was slower to leave, waiting until he'd caught my eye to say "Thank you," and then reluctantly leaving. I responded with a smile and a glance as I kept working.

I knew Hunter hadn't left. I could still feel him in the room, but I didn't want him to know just how aware of him I was, so I kept my head down until I couldn't stand it anymore. I straightened, wiping

my forehead with the back of my arm. He was there at the table, leaning back in his chair, one hand resting on the tabletop, looking at me as though he had all the time in the world.

"Can I get you something else to eat?" I asked, not only because it was the only thing I could think to say, but because I liked the idea of him wishing for more of my food.

He smiled. "No, I've had plenty."

I nodded and brushed crumbs from the counter, hoping that he stayed because he found comfort here.

"Do you ever eat?" he asked.

"Of course."

"When?"

I shrugged. "Once everyone else has had their fill."

He didn't say anything but continued to look at me. I didn't last more than a few heartbeats before I had to look away.

A few moments later, Miriam came in with a basket full of clean dishes.

Hunter stood and crossed to her. "Here, let me take that," he said, pulling the basket from her hands. "Where does it go?"

She led the way across the room and had him deposit it on the counter just beside the door that led to the corridor. "You well?" I heard her murmur.

I looked up in time to see him nod before asking in return, "You?"

"Yes," she said with a smile.

With a satisfied nod of his own, Hunter crossed to the outside door. "Thank you for the food," he said to me before exiting into the dim evening.

It was such a small moment. Very few words had been spoken between him and his sister, but I could feel the history between them. The understanding and affection. It gave me so much hope for them, and so much satisfaction that I had had a hand, however small, in bringing them to this point.

The dirt and rocks crunched beneath our feet as Miriam and I walked to Murrwood Village to attend market. I planned to have her come with me several times before handing the chore over to her entirely.

We worked through the market methodically, stopping only at the stalls where I knew I could find the necessary items. Our vegetables and meats were delivered to us weekly by local farmers. Here at market, we bought herbs and spices. Fruits for desserts. Utensils that needed replacing.

Once we'd purchased everything on our list, we retraced our steps through the market. When I spotted a heavy iron skillet that I was certain I did not truly need, I couldn't help but stop to admire it. Miriam pulled me from my distraction when she said, "Oh look. Hunter is here."

I followed her gaze and saw Hunter speaking with Miss Garnet.

Miss Garnet was our local mystic. She was the kind of character that the local children whispered about in hushed and awed tones, calling her a witch and wondering if she was more than one hundred years old.

The truth was that Miss Garnet was eccentric. She did believe she could commune with spirits and sold incense and talismans that she claimed could bring others in contact with their lost loved ones—or their lost enemies, if that was their wish. Most of the villagers either saw her as an oracle or as a hack. Only a select few viewed her as anything in between.

I tended to like Garnet. Her claims were nonsense, but she was sweet and entertaining, and in addition to her spirit-seeking trinkets, she sold other magical and fairy items—little crowns and

scepters made from twigs, leaves and vines, accoutrements for the aspiring fairy prince or princess.

"Who's that he's speaking with?" Miriam asked, her eyes narrowing in what looked like suspicion.

"That's just Garnet. She claims she can speak with spirits, but she's harmless."

"Hmm. What business do you suppose Hunter has with her?"

I looked back, studying the way he was tucked somewhat out of sight, to the side of the stall, speaking with Garnet. Their heads were bent close together, as if discussing confidences.

There was an exchange of items between them, likely merchandise and coins, before each slipped their acquisitions into pockets. Then Hunter gave the witch woman a single nod before pulling his hat low and hurrying away through the crowd.

Consternation likely blanketed my face as I turned back to his sister. "That was very mysterious of him."

"Very," she agreed. "He doesn't usually care for fortune tellers or mystics." Her mouth was screwed to the side in puzzlement, then she shook it off and grabbed my hand. "Let's go see what that was about."

"Oh," I said, quickly setting the skillet aside. "Yes, certainly." I let Miriam tug me along, my stomach a little fluttery as I contemplated catching up to Hunter and demanding to know what he was up to.

We kept him in sight as we worked our way through the market, not bothering to catch up until he was on the road headed home. Then Miri hitched up her skirt and ran after him. "Hunter!" she called.

He stopped and waited for her to catch up. "Miri. What are you doing here?"

"Coming back from market," she said, gesturing toward the basket that hung on her arm, then glancing back at me. "Emeline is showing me how it's done so that I can take the task on myself."

Hunter's eyes shifted to me, silently watching my approach.

"Good day, Hunter," I said when I had nearly reached them.

"Good day, Emeline." He opened his mouth to say more, but Miriam's words ran over him.

"Have you visited any mystics today?" she asked, doing her best to look innocent and failing entirely.

Hunter's face twitched in surprise. "What?"

"The mystic," she said, then turned to me. "What was her name?"

"Miss Garnet," I supplied, surprised by Miriam's blunt approach.

"Yes." She turned back to her brother. "You visited Miss Garnet, the mystic"—she waved her hand in the air—"fortune teller. Whatever you want to call her. Why?"

It took Hunter a moment to get his wits about him. Then he stuttered, "I—bought something from her."

Miriam rolled her eyes. "Yes, obviously. But why? You don't trust people like her."

He shook his head. "I don't trust people who want to tell my fortune, but I'm perfectly willing to purchase actual goods from them." He turned and started walking, his sister falling into step beside him.

"And what goods would those be?" Miriam pried.

From my position walking a little behind them, I saw the nervous look he gave her as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny wood carving. My mind immediately flew to the carving he'd given me all those years ago.

Miriam took it, looking confused. "Is this one of yours?"

He snorted. "You know I'm not that good. I can't do detail work like this. Which is why I bought it. I want to study it and see if I can imitate it."

When Miriam handed it back, I tried to see what it was, but the wooden figurine was so small that it disappeared into the palm of his hand before I got a look at it.

The siblings fell into easy conversation. I was happy to hang back and listen, enjoying their banter. Hunter walked with a quiet dignity, unruffled by the way Miriam tended to bounce and fidget, constantly readjusting the hold she had on her basket until he took it from her. Miriam's curls shook and quivered with each step, held under control by her kerchief. I found myself a little envious of their easy camaraderie. Miriam respected and looked up to her brother, while he was fond of and amused by her.

On occasion, Hunter would glance back at me, politely ensuring that I was not falling behind. It gave me a feeling of being watched over, which was oddly comforting.

6

The water surrounding me was blessedly cool. I'd snuck away as soon as lunch had finished so that I could once again practice with my sword in the privacy of the woods. Despite the approach of autumn, it had been uncharacteristically warm the last several days, so taking a dip in the stream was precisely what I needed after all the exertion. I wouldn't be able to stay long; dinner wouldn't prepare itself, after all. But I had a few minutes to swim.

Cecily and Falstone had introduced me to this swimming hole. It was the perfect spot to float on my back, watching the leaves dance overhead, and allow the current to carry away my worries.

A branch snapped.

I pulled my limbs in, dropping my feet to the stream bed as I looked around, my ears perked for any other sounds.

Nothing along the shoreline or in the trees seemed out of the ordinary, but the conversation in the kitchen three days past was suddenly echoing in my head. There were poachers in this forest.

Stroking through the water, I made my way quickly to the shore and my clothing. The noise I'd heard had been made by something larger than a forest critter.

I examined the shadows around me with special care before climbing from the water. Worrying wasn't something I was overly prone to, but that one simple noise had me wound so tight that I stayed hunched over, scanning the trees with my eyes as my hands worked to wring the water from my chemise. I picked up my dress with deft fingers, staying as silent as I could manage.

The sun was bright, the earth beneath my feet soft. Birds sang their disparate tunes, but still my eyes watched, wary. I latched my belt around my waist, making certain that my sheathed knife was in the perfect position at my hip. My sword was a comfort, but one I didn't truly believe I would need.

As I reached for my kerchief to tie my hair, a movement in the trees made me freeze. I pulled my knife and stilled, my heart rate picking up until I recognized Hunter walking along a path a ways off, glancing behind him as he went.

My relief was so profound and so sudden that my sigh of relief was vocal.

Hunter's head snapped up and he came to an abrupt stop. His expression confused me, making my relief dissipate. Hunter looked...caught? Uncomfortable?

"You frightened me," I called by way of greeting.

He changed direction, coming toward me instead of continuing on the path, his brow furrowed, his mouth set in a more serious line than I was used to. "I'm sorry," he said as he neared. "I didn't..." He threw a thumb over his shoulder. "I was just..." But he didn't finish. "What are you doing here?"

I blinked at him. I was standing at the edge of a stream with bare feet and sopping wet hair. My activities weren't difficult to deduce.

"Swimming," I said with a smile.

He looked from me to the stream. "Ah." His eyes focused on my feet before trailing up to my face. He smiled. "You put on your knife before your shoes?" he asked, amusement smoothing the lines of his forehead.

"When I've heard noises of someone lurking in the woods?" I cocked an eyebrow at him. "Absolutely." I tried to say it with a laugh.

"I'm sorry I frightened you." He did look sorry, especially as his eyes fixed on the knife in my hand.

I waved him off and sheathed my knife. "Think nothing of it. I don't know why I was so jumpy."

His gaze wandered from me to the surrounding trees and underbrush. "Is it safe for you to be out here alone?" he asked, concern lacing his voice.

"I've grown up on these lands. Both Bridgefield and Sutton manor. Trust me, it's perfectly safe here." This was all true—or at least it had been, up until now. I was doing my best not to let the idea of poachers make me paranoid. After all, poachers usually wanted nothing but meat. Confrontation was their enemy. Still, the situation left me just a little on edge.

He tilted his head just a little as he studied me. "Are you certain? You look concerned."

I blew out a breath, wondering how he could see that. "I suppose it's the talk of poachers that's stuck in my head."

His eyes darted to the trees once more. "That is a concern. I don't know what to think of it." When his gaze came back to me, he looked uncertain, like he wished to say something but wasn't sure he should.

"What?" I prompted.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be roaming alone?" The suggestion came out as a question.

I sat to pull on my shoes. "*You* are roaming," I pointed out in an attempt to tease him. "Should I be afraid of you?" Despite my intent, the question felt more vital and more sincere than it should have been.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Unfortunately, I have it on good authority that I am not intimidating *at all*."

"Whose authority is that?"

"My sister's."

"Ah. Well, I would have to agree. I knew you well enough at Bridgefield to know you are no threat."

His eyes softened. "Yes, you did. Still, much has happened since then. You've certainly changed."

"Have I?" I knew I had, but I was curious to know what changes he saw in me.

He came close enough to sit down beside me, resting his forearms on his knees. "Yes, you have. More than I would have thought possible."

I swallowed, suddenly worried. "Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all." He turned to look directly at me. "You're just..." He paused for several moments as his gaze traced each feature of my face, which I was certain grew more and more red the longer he looked. Finally, he said, "Stronger. You wield swords and carry knives and swim alone."

My lips trembled as I fought a smile. "I also cook. That hasn't changed."

He grinned. "You're right. In that way, you're just more of what you were before. Taking care of people. Putting their needs above your own."

I couldn't hold his gaze anymore and looked away with a shake of my head. "You give me too much credit. I'm not that selfless, believe me."

"Just..." He sounded hesitant. "Do me a favor?"

I blinked at him, surprised at the request. "What?"

"Look out for yourself, too. Especially with the poachers. Something about that situation isn't right."

"Is poaching ever right?"

"No, but...I just worry."

I nodded but felt the need to say, "I don't wish to live my life in fear." I'd seen what that kind of stress did to a person. I'd seen how debilitating it was for both Marilee and Cecily to have fear ruling their lives. It was why I trained the way I did. It was why I went about on my own in the woods. It was why a young cook carried both a sword and a knife in her belt to go swimming. The best way to keep fear at bay was to be prepared to face it.

"And no one should," he agreed with me. "But perhaps caution is warranted."

I smiled. "That's what the knife is for."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Fair enough."

"What were you doing out here anyway?"

"Just on an errand for Pryce. Come," he said, jumping to his feet and holding out a beckoning hand. "Let me walk back with you."

As he pulled me to my feet, I tried to ignore the thrill that shot through me at the contact. When I set my hand on the arm that he offered, I had to remind myself that he was just Hunter and there was no need to get flushed over such casual contact.

It had been four years, and still Marilee insisted on this ritual once a month. We sat out on the veranda—Her Highness, Cecily, Beatrice and me—eating the pastries I'd prepared and drinking the obligatory tea.

Sir James had escorted his wife to the table, arranged cushions at her back and then left her with a kiss on the head. So instead of her usual regal posture, Princess Marilee reclined, leaning into the cushions to relieve some of the strain caused by the heavy weight of her belly. Still, she smiled, all contentment.

When she'd first married Mr. Sutton four years ago, I had assumed that after settling well into her life with Sir James, she would have found these gatherings to be superfluous. After all, our bond had been forged in strenuous and unusual times. It would have been understandable if she'd no longer felt the need to keep the close friendship we'd developed during her short and torturous marriage to Master Damian. Yet she'd remained unfailingly loyal, unconcerned with the opinion of outsiders and vehement in her defense of our time together.

"I think it's Emeline's turn to entertain us," Cecily said during a lull in the conversation. She turned to look at me, the mask of innocence she tried to put on betraying her wickedness.

I held up empty hands. "I have nothing entertaining to say."

She lifted her cup to her lips. "Yes, you do," she all but sang into her tea.

Marilee looked back and forth between Cecily and me before a delighted grin split her face.

"Cecily, do you know something that needs to be shared?"

Cecily settled her cup back on its saucer. "I do. But I think Emeline needs to tell it."

"I have nothing to tell," I insisted.

She tutted at me. "I live at the edge of the woods, darling. I *see* things."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help laughing. "Oh heavens, what in the world do you suppose you've seen?"

"You." She paused, drawing out the suspense. "And a young man." Another pause. "Walking back from the swimming hole together."

Marilee's hand gripped my forearm so quickly that it nearly sent me out of my seat. "There's a young man?" she asked with so much excitement I feared she might faint away on the spot.

"Oh, saints and glory," I groaned as embarrassment made my neck hot. "Can we not turn this into something it is not?"

"But who is he?" Marilee demanded.

"His name is Hunter," I answered, knowing that evasion was useless. "He's a newly hired groom, come to work here with his sister."

"The new kitchen maid?" Beatrice asked. "They've been here barely more than a week, and already you are *swimming* with him?"

My cheeks flamed at the implication, but I forced my voice to explain. "Firstly, I was not swimming with anyone. I was swimming alone. I ran into him after I'd gotten out, and he walked me back."

Each woman opened her mouth to share an opinion on this, but I held up a hand to stall them. "And secondly," I said loudly, "I knew Hunter and Miriam before."

Cecily's brow furrowed. "When before?"

I sighed. "Hunter worked at Bridgefield, as a footman. *Before*."

They all remained silent. We all knew what *before* meant, and we didn't like to dwell on it. *Before* meant the reign of Mrs. Braithwhite. *Before* meant Lord Rockwell and his manipulation of Marilee. *Before* was the reason the bond between us was unbreakable.

"So," I continued. "Hunter is a kind young man who knew me at Bridgefield. I helped him out when Miriam was sick. That is all."

"Hunter is Miriam's brother?" Cecily asked.

"Yes. And there has been no swimming together. This is not some great romance about to play out before your eyes." Though that idea was not an unattractive one.

There were several more moments of silence before Cecily spoke up again. "Falstone thinks Hunter has his eye on you."

I crossed my arms in a huff. "Well, Falstone can go to the devil." It was a pouting and petulant thing to say, but my flaming cheeks seemed to be blocking all my mature words and logic.

"All right," Marilee soothed, rubbing my arm. "I see we've pushed you too far. So as much as I would like to hear more about this boy, we will let it rest for now. Let us instead speak of the impending arrival of my child"—she set a hand on her rounded midsection—"and how impossible it seems that I could expand any further."

Aunt Beatrice and I smiled, but Cecily scowled. "At least you are nearing the end." She pouted dramatically. "I still have months to go."

The two mothers launched into an argument, debating over their childbearing woes, and I was happy to sit back and listen, relieved the conversation no longer revolved around me and Hunter. Though I couldn't keep my thoughts from swirling back to him. The way he'd sat with me at the edge of the stream, asking me to be cautious. I'd been watched over and protected by the women here at this table for years, but Hunter's concern was different. It felt more personal, because despite my being the same age as his sister, he didn't look at me the way he looked at Miriam. He didn't look at me like a younger sister the way Cecily and Marilee did. He didn't look at me like a child the way Beatrice did. The way he watched over me was different.

Miriam and I had finally gone out this morning for her first lesson. I think she was a little bit insulted when I presented her with a wooden sword.

"Don't you think I'm a little old for this?" she asked, letting it dangle from her loose grip and limp wrist.

I shook my head. "We all train with wooden swords. Trust me. If we were using real swords, you'd

be flinching with every move, worried that your stroke or mine would go astray. You can't gain confidence if you're afraid that imperfection will end with true injury—and it would if we used real swords. Once you have some practice under your belt, you can start practicing the moves with a real sword, but not against an opponent. We're here to learn, not kill each other."

She reluctantly agreed, looking embarrassed as she held the wooden implement before her.

"What is it that made you want to train, anyway?" Miriam asked as I demonstrated a proper stance.

"Mrs. Braithwhite."

Her brow crumpled in consternation. "That horrid housekeeper?"

I nodded. "When she left me bleeding in the kitchen that night, it was like she had stolen all my strength. All my confidence—what little I had. I felt less than nothing, and I thought that's simply the way things would always be because of who I was, my position in life, my size."

"You felt powerless," she said with understanding.

"Completely."

"Being ill made me feel that way. It's not a good feeling."

"No. It's not. And when Falstone started training Johnny, I envied him. I envied all the boys." I spun the sword in my hand, appreciating the feel of it. "I wanted so badly to join them, but it wasn't until Johnny started bringing his sister along that things changed. I saw Falstone instructing little Gretchen and thought perhaps I didn't have to feel so helpless." I stood alongside her and raised my sword so she could copy the movement. "I trusted Falstone, for many reasons. So when I had plucked up enough courage, I asked him to teach me." I lunged, thrusting my sword tip out in front of me. Miriam followed suit. "And Falstone didn't laugh. I'll always be grateful for that. He didn't even crack a smile. My request wasn't funny to him, and that's really what gave me the courage to continue, even when I was terrible at first. He acted as though it made complete sense to train a little kitchen girl."

We fell into our training and after only ten minutes of instruction, she seemed convinced that learning with a wooden sword wasn't so bad.

Half an hour was really all that we could spare. We'd gone out at sunrise, the moment the world was light enough for such things, but time was short before preparations for the day's meals needed to begin.

The princess and Sir James were visiting his mother at Maplegrove, which meant I had the day off. It also meant that I was leaving Miriam in charge of the kitchen and all the servants' meals. Luckily, I knew that Nellie would be around to assist and answer any questions.

We returned to the house, Miriam hurrying off to join Nellie while I went to my room. The usual autumn chill had returned, so I retrieved my cloak before going to the kitchens for one last check and to collect a basket of food for Mr. Tennsworth. It had been an age since I'd visited the old groundskeeper at Bridgefield, and I was anxious to check on him and catch up.

As I headed away from the manor, I took the long way around, purposely going by the stables, hoping to see Hunter. I saw Oliver, Ansel and Pryce, all hard at work, but Hunter was not among them.

My disappointment was quick and fierce, but I shook it off.

I'd have plenty of time to see him after I returned from my visit with Mr. Tennsworth. I had the whole day to myself, after all.

I made my way toward Bridgefield land, walking at a leisurely pace despite the burdensome basket I carried. In the past there had been more than a few people who accused me of working too hard and never slowing down. That might have been one of the reasons I'd slipped off to the swimming hole yesterday—to remind myself that I knew how to relax.

"You do nothing but work," Cecily had griped at me.

"That's not true. I train nearly every day of the week."

She rolled her eyes at me. "That is still work, dearest." Then she'd snatched Miles up from the ground before he was able to grab hold of the tail of a cat that had been swishing in front of him.

Today I planned to go by her cottage for a visit after I returned, just to prove that I was perfectly capable of doing something other than work.

She did have a point though. I was comfortable with work. I was safe in my small existence, keeping my head down. It wasn't lost on me that my obsession with training was wildly out of character. At least, it felt that way, especially my desire to compete. That felt too big and too bold for the likes of me, yet I wanted it. I truly did. Still, slowing down for a day would probably do me some good.

So I kept my walk at a sedate pace, trying to appreciate the sights and smells of the wide-open meadows where horses grazed and pranced, before finding the footpath that wound through the woods. I passed by the swimming hole, allowing the path to lead me toward the spot in the stream that was narrowest and therefore easiest to cross.

But before I reached that point, I was brought up short by a noise. It sounded much like two rocks being smacked together, over and over.

My feet stuck to the ground and I stilled, immediately wary. Then I carefully made my way forward, holding my skirts a bit off the ground so they wouldn't brush against any branches and give me away. After a few moments, I caught sight of the noisy culprit. A man knelt among the trees, his form mostly hidden by bushes. *Saints*, if this was a poacher setting a trap, what would I do?

I crept closer still, the man's form coming into full view.

Hunter.

He was here, out in the woods, in the middle of the day. Again. What was a groom doing digging in the dirt (or whatever he was doing) when he should have been going about his duties? He certainly wasn't cutting wood this time.

I positioned myself behind a tree, leaning out to watch and pulling my head back behind the trunk each time he looked as if he might glance over his shoulder. The movement of his shoulders and the intermittent smacking sound made it clear that he was digging or hammering something.

Eventually he stood, then bent again, straightening up with a large pile of leaves in his hands before he dumped it right over the area where he'd been working. Then he dusted off his hands, glanced around furtively and walked farther from me, stopping in front of a tree before pulling a hatchet from his belt and cutting off one thin limb after the other.

The added distance between us gave me the opportunity to slip by. I could continue down the footpath and out of sight. But if I did that, I would be plagued by questions of what Hunter was doing, and I simply couldn't abide the uncertainty. I was desperately curious to discover what it was he'd been working on. Was he hiding some sort of treasure? Setting a trap for small animals? Neither of those options made any sense, but neither did the fact that he was lurking in the woods instead of working in the stables.

Of course, if he *was* setting a trap for small animals...wasn't that poaching? I shook my head at the thought. Hunter wasn't stupid enough to do something so risky and illegal. Plus, he had no reason to poach animals, did he? He and his sister were well fed and well paid for their work. It must be something else. With that thought firmly in mind, I came out from my hiding spot and walked boldly toward him.

It didn't take him long to hear my approach. He turned toward me, at first looking alarmed and then

relieved when he recognized me. "Emeline," he greeted. "What are you doing out in the woods?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

He came toward me, one hand full of thin and supple branches as he hooked his hatchet onto his belt. He chewed on his lip a little, as if deciding whether to confide in me or not. "Do you happen to remember the bird carving I left you?"

My face heated. *Did I remember it?* It was one of my most prized possessions. "Yes, of course. I still have it."

His brow jumped and it occurred to me that I may have revealed too much. "Well," he said. "I'm honored you kept it for so long." He cleared his throat. "Um." He held up the wispy branches in his hand. "I'm working on a carving project. Sir James caught me whittling in the barn the other day, and instead of reprimanding me, he asked if I could make something for Her Highness." He dug in his pocket and pulled out a tiny figurine. "This is the one I purchased from Miss Garnet." He set it in my palm.

It was an elf peeking out from behind a flower, but while the elf was carved, the flower was assembled out of twigs and vines. I grinned. "This is just the sort of thing that Marilee would love."

"That's what Sir James said. But it's not my usual style, so I'm doing my best to imitate it."

I wondered why Sir James didn't simply buy more of these from Miss Garnet, and I was about to ask just that but I hesitated, not wanting Hunter to think that I didn't have confidence in his abilities.

"Now will you tell me what you're doing out here?" Hunter asked.

"Oh." I looked down at the basket that hung on my arm. "I'm going to visit Mr. Tennsworth." Hunter's eyes lit with interest. "Is he still at Bridgefield?"

I nodded.

He looked in the direction of Bridgefield. "I'll have to stop by soon and thank him for helping Miriam and me."

"I'm sure he'd appreciate that, and I should probably head there now," I said as I stepped away. "I try to be sure he's well fed on occasion."

A corner of his mouth curved up. "Always taking care of people," he murmured.

I gave him a smile, my heart lightened by the compliment, and went on my way.

I crossed the stream, using a series of rocks to do so. No doubt servant children of years past had placed them there in order to facilitate a smooth crossing.

I breathed in the tranquility of a beautiful day as I continued down the footpath, my basket swinging as I hummed a little tune to myself.

I passed by a field of wheat and walked alongside the vegetable garden that sat on the corner of Bridgefield property. The majority of their land was on this side of the house, closest to the stream and Sutton Manor. A large hill sprang up just on the other side of the building, offering shade in the summer and a wind barrier in the colder months.

It always surprised me when I stepped onto Bridgefield land and discovered the lack of oppressiveness that had been so deeply ingrained in it before. Much had dissipated with Lord Rockwell's death and Mrs. Braithwhite's departure, but now that it was rarely occupied by any member of the ducal family, it was almost pleasant. The small staff that kept it up were good people who had become almost a secondary family to those of us who resided at Sutton Manor.

"Ho there, Emeline."

I looked up at Tyson's greeting. He was on hands and knees, working in the garden.

"Hello, Tyson."

His grin held mischief. "Fancy a round of swords?"

I laughed. Tyson was two years my junior, and we were quite evenly matched. The prospect of exerting some energy by trying to pummel Tyson was tempting, but I knew neither of us had time for it. “Don’t you have work to do?”

He groaned and dug in the dirt once more. “Yes. You’re right. Mrs. Wolcroft ain’t the tyrant that Braithwhite was, but she’d have my head if she caught me sparring when I was supposed to be working. And Johnny would be none too happy either. What about you?” he asked, pointing at my basket with his chin. “You seeing to Mr. Tennsworth?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t *you* have work to do?”

I smirked at him. “I’ve got the day off.”

Half his face pulled up in surprise. “I haven’t known you to come around in the morning, day off or not.”

“I’m trying something new.”

He just gave me a grin and then bent his head to focus on his work. “Well. Best of luck to you. And you’d best prepare yourself because I’ve got a feeling I’ll be coming out ahead next time we cross swords.”

“I’ll enjoy squashing your ego.”

He let out an undignified “Ha!” and I walked on.

Mr. Tennsworth’s cottage was small, but well tended and cozy. In truth, for most of the years that I had known him, he’d spent little time inside his home. He’d always been out and about, tending to the grounds, doing his work, lending a helping hand wherever it was needed. Watching his health and stamina decline so rapidly over the past year had been difficult. I’d thought of him as permanent and indestructible. Being disabused of that notion had been a bitter draught to choke down.

I knocked twice on the rough wood of the door. “Mr. Tennsworth,” I called.

“Come in, Emeline.”

I opened the door, smiling at the strength in his voice. He was sitting in a cushioned chair by the window, a small painted bowl in his hands.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked.

He gave a little roll of his eyes. “I know your voice by now, Emeline.” He looked back at the bowl in his hands, turning it round and round, his hands shaking slightly. The bright bowl was incongruous in his plain home. It was also his greatest treasure. His wife, Lina, had painted that bowl, and she’d passed on more than ten years ago. I often found him this way, bowl in hand, staring out the window. He abruptly looked up at me and smiled. “Now come.” He tapped the chair next to his. “Tell me of your training. Do you continue to wallop those young men?”

My attempt at smothering my grin was unsuccessful. “Yes, but not all the time.”

He leaned toward me. “And are you still”—he tapped the side of his nose—“*not* competing at the festival?”

I blushed. Mr. Tennsworth had figured out my secret plans to compete as a boy nearly as soon as I’d made them. “You know very well that I would not be permitted to compete.”

He snorted. “I look forward to hearing the stories people tell once the festival is finished.” He gave me a wink. “Now then, tell me. Is Johnny making a mess of things without my guidance?”

I smiled. “Though he does not have your experience, nor your skill, he is a hard worker, and determined that everything be up to your standards.”

He smiled, seeming to relax a little more. “He’s a good lad. But the more important question remains.” He looked pointedly at the basket I’d set at my feet. “What have you brought me?”

I pulled bread from the basket, and his eyes lit up when I revealed a small jar of his favorite preserves. We fell into easy conversation as I put the food away and prepared a plate for him, keeping him company while he ate, and leaving him with a kiss on the forehead before I left.

7

On my way home from my visit with Mr. Tennsworth, I took the road instead of the path through the woods. It was quicker and I was anxious to get back to my kitchen. I had an idea for how to improve my meat pie.

The noise of an approaching wagon caught my ear. This road was not well traveled, so I stepped to the side of the road and turned to watch the approach of the wagon, curious about who might be passing through our small corner of the duchy.

It was more than startling, that first glimpse of the wagon. It hardly looked like a wagon at all, but like a great, hulking beast, rolling down the road. My eyes widened in fascination and I pushed my hood from my head to better take in the sight. The many little trinkets clinking against the wooden slats made me think it was a peddler's wagon, but the arrangement of the wooden slats and siding was clearly meant to cast this wagon in the role of some beast or other. There were even fiery red eyes painted onto the wooden head, which jutted out over the backs of the horses that drew it forward. A man sat atop the beast, looking for all the world as though he were riding on a great predator's shoulder. It might have been an intimidating sight if the man hadn't raised a hand in friendly greeting as soon as he saw me.

"Halloo!"

I managed to shut my gaping mouth. "Morning, sir," I said with a dip of my head.

"Ho, there," he said as he pulled back on the reins, bringing the horses and the strange beast-wagon to a stop. Then he turned to me with a smile. "Morning, miss. Might I interest you in any of our wares?" he asked with a sweep of his arm.

I shook my head. "No, thank you."

"Very well. Might I then trouble you for directions?" He looked a bit chagrined.

I laughed a little. "Lost your way, have you?"

"I won't claim that blunder quite yet, but I do want to be sure of our way before I find myself leagues off course."

I chuckled. "A wise course of action. What is your destination?"

"Murrwood Village."

"I'm afraid you won't make it there if you continue in this direction. Murrwood Village is the other way. You should have taken the right fork in the road, not the left."

The door at the back of the wagon opened and another man stuck his head out. "Tell me I heard that wrong."

I looked back to the man atop the wagon and he grimaced.

"Morley, how many times will this happen before you learn?" The second man jumped down and came toward the front of the wagon. "My apologies, miss. The name's Daggon." He swept into a bow, and when he straightened, he glanced back toward the door where a young woman peeked out at me, her face still half-hidden. "That is my sister, Elise. She is the quiet one."

I gave her a small smile, knowing very well what it was like to be the quiet one. She ducked back

inside, clearly shy.

Daggon then directed a scowl at the wagon's driver. "And that directionally-challenged fool is my brother, Morley."

"You're more than welcome to take over the driving, Dag," Morley called from atop the beast, as though this was a familiar spat they had.

"Always trying to foist your responsibilities off on me," Daggon muttered, shaking his head as he turned back to me.

They were both young men, of an age to be newly married or thereabouts. Daggon had a mischievous grin that gave him a boyish air and Morley had the kind of face that nearly any woman would have to admit was attractive. A fine pair of brothers, these two. Most peddlers I had encountered had the look of hard work and weary hands. It seemed these two were young enough to still enjoy peddling and consider it an adventure. With such a wagon, I could understand why.

I looked up at it, admiring the way so many thin wooden boards had been placed and overlapped to give the impression of fur and movement. A rudimentary impression for certain, but successful all the same.

"I see the beast has caught your eye," Daggon said, pulling me from my inspection.

"Indeed. I've never seen the like. Whatever is the reason for such a thing?"

"It's our livelihood," Daggon answered easily before turning his attention to his brother. "Turn it around, Morley!" he hollered. "It's time we headed in the right direction."

Morley leaned his elbows into his knees as he looked down at his brother. "And how do you suggest I do such a thing?" he asked, gesturing at the trees that lined the road and the narrowness of the space between. We were just above Bridgefield, so there was also a fairly steep drop-off to one side.

I looked at the odd wagon once more. A normal cart could simply find a space in the road that was on the wider side and maneuver it around, but this was no normal wagon. It was longer and taller. Broader too.

Daggon seemed unconcerned. "I've seen you maneuver out of worse positions."

Morley shook his head before turning his attention to me. "Miss, do you know of a place close by where we might circle around? Or is my brother's foolhardy suggestion really the best course of action?"

A small smile curved my mouth as I enjoyed their banter. "Continue on the way you're going. A short distance ahead you can turn off the road toward the manor house. There will be plenty of room in front of the stables for you to turn around."

"Very good, miss." Morley tipped his hat to me in thanks.

When I looked back to Daggon, he gave me a smile and a wink that made my neck heat before giving me a nod of his own. He walked to the back of the wagon, grabbing hold of a pole that stuck out of the back, several pots hanging from the protuberance. He jumped up onto a step and was about to duck back inside when he turned back to me. "Are you going that way, miss?"

"Oh. Yes. I am employed there."

"Morley," Daggon hollered again. "Be a gentleman and offer the lady a ride."

"Oh, that is not necessary," I protested.

"Course it is," Morley argued, coming to his feet so that he could lean over the side and offer me a hand. "We're traders, after all, and are more than happy to pay for your help."

I didn't move toward him but stood still as I looked at his offered hand, not knowing if I should accept or not. Could there be any harm? Of course there *could*, but it was unlikely.

"Come now," he encouraged. "You asked about the beast here and we haven't had a chance to tell you its story. Plus, we'll get you there faster than your own two feet could."

I did want to know about the strange wagon. And I had my knife strapped to my belt if I needed it. "Very well," I agreed, stepping toward him and handing him the basket I held.

He quickly put it beside his feet before reaching down again. "There is a foothold there."

I grabbed hold of his hand and used the foothold to boost myself up, not that I really needed it. He pulled me so easily that my help was hardly necessary, and I soon found myself sitting on the side of the wagon. Morley kept a firm hold on me as I swung my legs up and over the side, then slid onto the bench that sat a little lower than the side. The head of the beast protruded out in front of us, narrowing through the neck and head before coming to a pointy snout.

"Curious, indeed."

Morley grinned. "Glad you think so." He snapped the reins, sending the hulking wagon into motion. "We are, after all, performers, as well as peddlers of trinkets and curiosities."

"Performers?"

"The Wolfe family has a long history of entertaining wherever we go. We are singers, actors, dancers, storytellers. And this"—he patted the side of the wagon beast—"is just another part of our performance. It draws in the crowds, you see."

"I do see." The way he described it was surprising, but it all made perfect sense, especially knowing that their last name was Wolfe. "That's a bit ingenious, Mr. Wolfe."

"It's more than *a bit* ingenious, and the name's only Morley."

"Will you be in Murrwood Village for the harvest festival then?"

"Of course. People are much more free with their funds after the work of the harvest is finished. It's a meager living we make, so we have to do all we can to capitalize on the situation. But the beast helps." He gave the wagon another loving pat, affection in his voice.

"You mean the wolf?" I asked, realizing that with their surname, that's surely what the beast was meant to be.

He just grinned at me and then turned his eyes back to the road.

"And how did you come to own such a remarkable piece of work?" A meager living would not allow for such a creation to be bought. "It simply seems too large and elaborate to be practical. Why ever was it made in the first place?"

"Make no mistake, it wasn't made quickly, or on a whim." He patted the side of the wagon. "It started as an ordinary peddler's wagon, but was added onto bit by bit by each member of the family who used it for their livelihood. Peddling is secondary to our performing, and the wolf has grown into our greatest player."

I bent over the edge, trying to examine the construction. "Fascinating," I said, truly impressed. "It just seems so impossible."

"I told you," he said, tapping the side of his nose. "Generations. We come from *generations* of performers. Each one has added on and improved this beauty."

"How very lucky for you." An odd lump had formed in my throat and I swallowed it down. What would it be like to have such a legacy? To have a family that had built something of worth and longevity? I fingered the edge of the cloak that surrounded me. The only tangible reminder of my parents. Then I took a deep breath and faced forward. "You'll take that turn right there," I said, pointing to the drive that would lead us to Sutton Manor.

"I can't thank you enough, miss," Morley said as he carefully turned his team onto the drive. "We'd have wasted precious time and daylight if you hadn't helped us."

"Think nothing of it."

"Might we see you at the harvest festival? I think you'll find it a treat to see what we can do."

"If I am able to attend, I'll certainly be on the lookout for you. My interest is piqued, I assure you."

"That's what I like to hear."

We rumbled into the yard by the stables a few moments later. Morley grinned as he saw the stunned faces of the stablemaster and the grooms who had all stopped their work to stare at the spectacle.

However, I became more than a little self-conscious because of the stares I was receiving, and as soon as the wagon was brought to a halt, I thanked Morley and went to climb down the side of the wagon. However, the seat of the wagon was as tall as me and half again, so jumping down would be foolish. Luckily, I saw that the foothold I had used earlier was not the only one, so I threw my legs over and turned my body toward the wagon, anchoring my foot as I started to lower myself down.

Morley rose to his feet. "Let me help you, miss."

"No need. I have it." Something about having him take hold of my hands when in view of so many people left me ill at ease.

Halfway down, I felt my cloak snag. I stopped to free it, but my foot slipped.

"Emeline!" I heard someone say in panic just before a pair of strong hands took hold of my waist, stopping my fall just enough that I did not injure myself, but unable to prevent the horrid ripping sound that rent the air.

I stumbled when my feet hit the ground, but not even the warmth of Hunter's hands could distract me from inspecting my cloak. A hole the length of my forearm now gaped in the well-worn fabric.

I pressed my lips and closed my eyes, swallowing down my heartache.

"Are you well?" Hunter asked, stepping back so that he could see me.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, of course." Physically, at least.

"Apologies," Morley called just before jumping to the ground with my basket in hand. "We had lost our way and in order to turn around, the lass directed us to this yard." He set my basket at my feet and then placed a hand on the side of the wagon. "She's a tough contraption to maneuver in tight spots."

Pryce approached, looking none too pleased. "I don't mind you turning around, but you'll need to do it and move on. We've all got work and don't have the time for distractions."

"Of course." Morley gave a nod of apology. "We'll leave straightaway. Miss." He turned to me with a bow. "Our thanks, again."

I dropped a quick curtsey. "Of course."

He gave me a final smile and then pulled himself back up the side of the wagon and onto the seat at the beast's shoulder. In only a few moments, the contraption was pulling away down the drive, the pots and trinkets dangling at its sides making a jolly racket as they went.

Pryce shook his head as he turned back toward the stables, muttering, "Meddlesome peddlers."

My mouth and brow turned down in a frown.

"He's right," Hunter said beside me. "They should not have imposed here."

I looked from Hunter to the disappearing wagon and back again. "But I told them they could. They only needed room to turn around and they were hardly a bother."

"Only because Pryce turned them away so swiftly."

My frown deepened. "They were perfectly amiable. There was no need for Pryce to be so cold."

"Peddlers are notorious for their dishonesty."

"Perhaps," I conceded, though I did not agree with the sweeping generalization. "But I still think it was an overreaction."

He heaved a sigh. "I would just hate for you to put yourself at risk."

"I assure you, there was no risk. I rode atop a wagon for less than the distance between here and Bridgefield—a path I walk by myself nearly every week," I said, then bent to grab my basket. "You needn't worry."

I turned back toward the manor, my fingers grazing over the rip in my cloak as tears pressed at my eyes.

"Emeline," Hunter said from behind just before I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"What?" I asked, blinking up at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, clearly startled by my tears. "I... I didn't mean to upset you. I was just—"

"It's not you," I admitted, shaking my head. "It's nothing. It's stupid." I turned to walk away again.

He gently pulled me back around to face him. "Wait. It's not stupid. Whatever it is, just... tell me what's wrong."

I didn't want to. I would sound ridiculous, crying over a hole in my cloak. Feeling ridiculous about crying made me want to cry even more, but I knew if I tried to keep it inside, it would only get worse. So I let myself sound ridiculous. "It's just—" I held up my cloak. "My mother gave it to me."

He looked down at the tear, then back up at me, confused. "Can't it be mended?"

"Of course it can, but that's not—never mind." I walked away, feeling childish.

This time, instead of stopping me, he fell into step beside me. Halfway between the stables and the kitchen door, he spoke up. "I'm sorry."

I could only shake my head, mortified that I'd fallen apart over something so trivial.

Yet it wasn't trivial. Not to me.

He followed me in through the kitchen and to the sickroom, where I lit a lamp and searched for a needle and thread, sniffing as I unlatched my cloak and sat on the small bed tucked in the corner, expecting that Hunter would go. Instead, he lingered in the doorway.

Finally he spoke up. "Your mother is dead?"

I looked up and when our eyes met, I knew I didn't have to answer. He already knew, but I nodded anyway before looking back at the thread in my hand, knotting it. "My father too," I admitted, though he hadn't asked.

He let out a sigh and came into the room, sitting on the small chair right beside the bed, leaning his elbows into his knees and staring down at his hands. "My mother has been dead a long time. My father is... probably still alive... somewhere."

"Somewhere?"

He looked up at me. "He's a peddler."

His admission surprised me. It seemed odd that a peddler's son would be so belligerent toward someone of the same profession.

He shook his head as he continued. "There was never enough money. Never enough food," he said, a haunted look in his eyes. "He was desperate. All the time."

My heart reached out to him. "You know what it's like, then. So why were you so rude to those peddlers when they had done nothing wrong?"

He let out a deep, stuttering sigh. "My father was so desperate that in order to get a little money and one less mouth to feed, he started—looking for buyers." He paused, chewing on the inside of his lip, angry tension building in his jaw.

"Buyers for what?" I asked, though I had a feeling I didn't want to know.

He shook his head. "Not what. Who." He fixed his eyes on me. "Miriam."

My gasp was audible.

"I couldn't let it happen," he said, shaking his head just a little, like it was involuntary. "So instead,

I gave him two fewer mouths to feed.”

Words failed me, so I looked back at my cloak and ran the needle through the fabric. That was the only sound for several long moments. Just the thread shushing through the fabric as I thought about the sort of bravery it would have taken for him to take his sister and run, into the unknown of a world that did not like orphaned beggars. “How old were you?”

“Fourteen. Miri was ten.”

“I’m sorry.”

As he looked at me, his features softened and he even managed a soft smile. “We turned out all right.”

My smile was sad. Sad for what he and Miri had suffered. “I was lucky,” I acknowledged. “I had Beatrice to come to.” My gaze faltered and fell to my lap again. “I know I wouldn’t have been fine on my own.”

“You’re capable,” he argued.

I shook my head. “Now, perhaps. But not then. The world would have crushed me.” I sniffed again. “Miri is lucky to have you.” I wiped at my eyes. “And I’m sorry about your father.”

He gave a sad smile. “In many ways, I’m glad. He gave me the push I needed to leave, and to take Miri with me.” He looked down and I heard him swallow. “I almost left a couple times, by myself. I almost convinced myself that leaving on my own and letting Miri stay with him would be best for everyone. So when I heard him planning—” He cut off and looked back at me. “I’m just grateful I heard it.”

“I’m certain she’s grateful as well.”

He shook his head. “She didn’t know, thankfully. No child should have to know that.” There was a steely stoicism in his eyes when they next met mine. “But at least she didn’t seem to mind leaving with me.”

“I don’t suppose there was much affection from your father?”

He scoffed. “He valued us for the amount of money we brought in, nothing more.”

Before I could think it through, I reached out and put my hand over his. “I’m sorry.”

His smile still wasn’t full, but his eyes looked at me with gratitude. “Thank you.” We sat in silence for several seconds before he said, “I should get back to work.”

I nodded, and a moment later he left with a bow of his head. I sat in stillness, thinking about all he’d said. The revelation of how he’d grown up and the fate that had almost befallen Miri made my heart ache. I’d lost my parents young, yes. But they had loved me. And then Aunt Beatrice had taken me in and she had loved me. I’d never known the misery of being unloved, and it made me cherish my mother’s cloak all the more.

Fortunately, this being my day off allowed me to sit and focus on mending my cloak, placing my stitches so close together that they butted up against one another. Perhaps, given enough time, I could turn it into a sort of embroidered pattern to hide the gash.

A short knock sounded and I looked up to see Aunt Beatrice standing in the doorway. She looked at me with sorry eyes. “I heard what happened.”

“I wasn’t paying enough attention.” I’d been embarrassed, sitting atop that wagon and too eager to get down.

“Accidents happen, my dear.”

“But...”

“But it was your mother’s,” she said with complete understanding. “I know. Can I help?”

I nodded and she scooted close, threading a needle and starting to work alongside me.

8

I had just put several meat pies in to bake when Cecily swept through the door, looking windblown and winded. “Oh, Emeline,” she said as she rushed over to me, a grin lighting her face. “Can you come? You really must see this.”

“I—” I looked to Miriam, who nodded her head.

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll watch the pies.”

I followed after Cecily as she hurried back through the door and trotted off across the yard, looking back at me like an eager pup.

“Care to tell me what this is all about?” I asked, surprised that I was having trouble keeping up with a woman in her fifth month of pregnancy.

She grinned, stopping only long enough to let me catch up and wind her arm through mine so that she could hurry me along more efficiently. “It is the sweetest thing. I’ve no idea who’s done it, but I think Marilee might be even more pleased with it than the children are.”

She’d done a remarkable job of enthusiastically not answering my question, but I didn’t press it. This seemed the sort of thing that might be best as a surprise.

We stepped onto the footpath that led through the trees toward Bridgefield, and we were near the point of crossing over the stream when a chattering of excited voices reached my ears.

“Look at the tiny stairs!” Marilee’s voice exclaimed.

“Are we going to see a fairy, Mama?” Seraphina’s little voice questioned.

Cecily and I hurried our steps and found Marilee sitting on the ground, Seraphina in her lap, while Miles sat in the tight hold of Seraphina’s nursemaid, Jane.

A few more steps brought the object of their fascination into view.

It was, quite simply, a fairy house. Only it wasn’t simple at all. It was a lovely miniature cottage, sitting in the middle of a fairy ring. Marilee’s dog, Rogue, lay on the ground, his nose just shy of touching the mushrooms.

I sank down beside them in awe. The roof was made of bark. Tiny twigs had been lashed together to form stairs and a railing, which led to a leaf door. The entire thing was bedecked in flower petals and greenery. Vines held the branch framework together and moss was laid inside. Leaves covered the ground.

“Did you conjure this?” I asked Marilee, though I knew very well where it had come from. It wasn’t quite the same as the carving Hunter had purchased from Miss Garnet, but he’d done a tremendous job bringing the whimsy and fantastical mind of Her Highness to fruition. It was more than I ever would have expected. The detail was truly incredible.

“Of course not,” she said, her face alight with a grin, her eyes bright with wonder. “The fairies made it.” She spared but a moment to look at me and wink before continuing to marvel over the creation with Seraphina.

Miles was doing his best to admire it as well, but his efforts included repeated attempts to grab each and every part, so Cecily kept a tight hold on him, just far enough to be out of reach.

"This is where they eat?" Seraphina asked, pointing to one of the mushrooms that made up the ring.

"Yes," Marilee answered. "Those are their tables. Fairies always like to dine outside."

"Can we eat here?"

Marilee's smile intensified as she looked down at the wonder and hope on her daughter's face.

"No, my love. Fairies are much too shy to invite such large people to eat with them."

"Where are they?" Seraphina asked, looking up at the trees surrounding us.

Marilee shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe off doing work in the forest. Perhaps swimming in the stream, or gathering flowers for decoration. Fairies are very busy folk, you know."

Seraphina turned back to the house and used both fists to prop up her chin. "I like their house."

"It is lovely, isn't it?" Marilee agreed.

"Come, Miles," Cecily said as Miles's struggles to take hold of any part of the fairy house increased. "Shall we go home and see if we can make a little house just for you?"

"Me!" He squealed and threw his arms around her neck.

"I'll take that as a yes," she chuckled, waving at us before heading toward her own cottage.

Marilee, despite her large pregnant belly, stayed there on the ground, talking with Seraphina about each little detail of the house.

I looked around me, half expecting to see a fairy or two flitting among the leaves but actually searching for Hunter. I truly hoped that he was nearby to see the wonder on little Seraphina's face. I caught sight of him before too long, peeking out from behind a tree, a huge grin on his face. And he wasn't alone. Sir James was behind a neighboring tree, his face lit with love and joy as he watched his wife and daughter discovering the surprise that he'd orchestrated.

I looked back at the fairy house once more, appreciating the tiny chairs waiting to be occupied and the tiny planter below one window.

Clearly, Hunter was more than he seemed. He was a master fairy-house builder.

The day after discovering the fairy house, I was happy that Hunter stayed in the kitchen after eating dinner. It was something he did fairly often, and I hoped it indicated a desire to be around me. But maybe I was simply more familiar than the others. Sometimes we had the opportunity to converse. Other times, one or both of us would be pulled away by our duties.

Today I lingered, organizing and planning until Nellie and Miriam had finished their duties and went on their way.

Nearly as soon as we were left alone, I turned toward him, leaning back against the counter. I took a breath, preparing to ask him the many questions that were on my mind, but the way his brow rose, pulling one corner of his mouth up with it, made me forget all my words.

His grin widened as he recognized my struggle to speak. "Go on, then," he prompted. "You looked as though you were about to start an interrogation. Don't let me stop you."

In lieu of speaking, I decided to cross to the table and sit across from him. I pinned him with a prodding look.

His smile broadened further, not the least bit nervous or intimidated.

"You, sir, are full of surprises," I finally said.

"Oh really? You think me a man of mystery? I suppose I can be happy with the title."

"You build fairy houses."

He looked down, and I could have sworn that a pale pink dusted his cheeks. "Only the one."

"You did a tremendous job. Her Highness was thrilled with it."

"I'll admit, I was surprised by Sir James's request at first. But I think I understand it now."

"The princess isn't exactly quiet about the fanciful ideas she likes to indulge in," I said with a little laugh. "You'll get used to it."

He looked up at me, his face a bit scrunched. "I was a little worried at first. I'm not used to fairy-house building, and I had to get some advice from Miriam."

Of course he would seek the advice of his sister. "Well, you did an admirable job of getting it done. I hope the piece you purchased from Miss Garnet was helpful."

"It was," he answered, then looked at me with a question written in his brow. "Does she really claim to be a mystic?"

I nodded. "She'll happily predict your future or give you a warning. Some call her a spirit-talker, but I think that's mostly to scare the children and give them something to wonder about."

"Hmm," he said. "I hope she's not the type to take advantage."

I shook my head. "I've never heard someone who was upset over something she actually said. Most just don't like that she could pass as a witch."

He scoffed. "I'm sure that gives her an advantage. People are scared of anything they can't explain, while at the same time being fascinated by it. It's what makes them good marks."

"Marks?"

He looked at me like he was startled by the question. Perhaps he had said more than he intended. But instead of avoiding the question, he took a breath and answered. "A mark is someone a thief steals from. A good mark can be easily swindled, stolen from or cheated."

I shook my head. "I don't think Miss Garnet is trying to cheat people."

He tried to smile, but it turned more to a grimace. "I may not be afraid of fortune tellers and the like, but I don't care for them either. Most do take advantage, so I've learned not to trust them."

"Like you've learned not to trust peddlers?"

He nodded. "In some ways, the different traveling performers and peddlers are a community. There can be a sense of safety with those who live the same sort of life that you do. It's tempting to think of them as friends, family even. But the truth is that everyone is looking out for themselves. Community will never trump survival."

"It did for you," I pointed out.

"That's because I had real family to look after."

And right then, he earned another measure of my respect. I smiled my understanding. "Fair enough." The way he spoke of Miriam and all he'd done to protect and care for her was just so...noble. I couldn't help but admire him for it.

He let a half-smile pull at his mouth then stared at the ground for a few moments, apparently lost in thought. "You need more wood," he announced abruptly.

I blinked. "What?"

He nodded toward my wood box, which was in fact quite sparsely filled at the moment.

"Oh, yes. I should go get some." I headed toward the door, confused by his abrupt change of topic but happy to be reminded before the sun set. I grabbed my cloak, frowning at the recently repaired tear, and threw it around me.

"I'll help," Hunter said, his hand resting on my lower back for the tiniest moment as he followed me out the door. I liked the feel of his hand there, but I had to wonder what it meant. Was I just a comfortable and familiar presence, or were his feelings for me more significant than that?

The sunset painted the sky above the trees in pinks and purples as we walked past the garden and on toward the woods.

"It's strange," Hunter said, breaking the silence.

"What is?"

"Being here, so close to Bridgefield, and yet feeling like I'm miles away from it."

I chuckled. "I know the feeling."

"The family really never comes to stay anymore?"

"They do, but it's rare. I expected they would come to visit more after they repaired the damage from the fire. But it's only Lord Edmund Rockwell that ever comes. Usually with a group of friends. Other than that, they just let the staff have the run of it. I've never known the duke and duchess to come."

He blew out a breath. "I assume everyone is grateful for that."

"More than you know."

We walked on a bit before he spoke again. "It was a surprise to see you here."

I chuckled. "I can imagine. I wasn't exactly expecting your arrival either."

He shook his head. "It wasn't just that you were here. It was you."

"What about me?"

"Well, back then you were just the little kitchen girl. And now"—he gestured toward me—"obviously, you are...not the little kitchen girl anymore," he finished in a rush, then closed his eyes and hung his head as if he were humiliated.

I was confused. And when he looked up at me, he must have seen it written all over my face.

"Why are you making that face?" he asked.

"Because," I sputtered, "you're not making sense."

"How?"

"I *am* still the little kitchen girl. I'm still little. I practically live in the kitchen—happily at that. And I am still a girl."

He groaned and dragged a hand down his face. "You know that is not what I meant."

"I have not a clue what you meant." I laughed a little, enjoying his discomfort.

"You're a woman now, Em."

I looked away, willing any hints of red to stay off my cheeks. "Hardly." As much as I wished to be seen as a woman, the idea that Hunter could see me that way seemed more than improbable; it seemed impossible.

"Truly, Emeline. Truly. When I look at you now, you look...all grown up." He dropped his gaze.

"*Saints, I sound like an idiot,*" he muttered to himself.

I would have liked to tease him, but I was too busy blushing.

He took a breath and continued. "Your capabilities, your skill, and everything else..." He shook his head. "You're *not* the little kitchen girl anymore."

He would probably never know what it meant to have him openly acknowledge my skills as part of my maturity and not just a child's fleeting interest. For a moment, I considered confiding in him, telling him what I planned to do at the festival, but I kept silent. The opportunity to compete was too precious to me; I couldn't risk it going awry.

We entered the woods and found the little clearing where the logs were gathered, split, and piled. The spot where I'd first seen the man beside me instead of the boy I'd known before.

Hunter went to a log that lay on its side on the ground, an ax stuck partway through it. "Looks like someone gave up." He set his foot to the log and pried the ax loose on his first try, then set the log on the stump and swung the ax, splitting it in two.

"Show-off," I teased, trying desperately to act like the friend I was to him when all I could think about was the way he'd called me a capable woman.

He grinned over his shoulder at me. "If you want me to show off..." He turned his back to me, raised the ax over his head with both hands and then threw it at a thick tree more than ten paces away. The ax head embedded in the trunk.

I was impressed despite myself.

His grin was huge when he turned to face me. "Was that sufficient showing off?"

"Yes, I do believe that's acceptable. Now you can show me how much wood you can carry in one load." I nodded at the pile of split logs.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched dramatically. "With pleasure."

I laughed and the sound echoed through the trees.

Hunter kept catching my eye.

The stable hands were all sitting at the table, eating their morning meal as usual.

But this time, our eyes didn't meet just once or twice. It was constant. We both kept looking back at one another so often that it was becoming incredibly distracting, but I couldn't stop. Each time I looked up to find him already looking at me, and each time I looked at him only to have his eyes flit back to mine, my stomach would jump in anticipation.

Somehow, Hunter was able to engage in our little game while still carrying on a conversation with the others.

I, on the other hand, was turned into an utter disaster. I couldn't keep track of what I was doing. I would turn to get something from behind me, only to realize that it was already on the counter at which I'd just been working.

Miriam had to point out twice that I had already added the ingredient I was looking for.

And then the flour toppled.

An entire bowl of flour lost the battle with my elbow and spilled all over the floor.

"Laws, what a mess," Miriam said as both she and Nellie stepped forward to help.

I held up a hand to stay them. "You two keep working or we'll never finish in time. I'll handle this." I dropped to my knees, cursing Hunter for being so adorable that I couldn't keep my eyes to myself.

I'd only scooped up a couple handfuls before he knelt on the floor across from me, along with Oliver. Both started grabbing up handfuls of flour.

"I'll help clean this up," Hunter said to Oliver. "You go on to the stables. Sir James will want his horse soon, and you know he prefers that you take care of him."

I could tell that Oliver was biting his tongue, wanting to argue but not quite willing. He turned his eyes to me.

"I'll be fine," I assured him with a smile. "Duties come first." And I wanted a chance to speak with Hunter.

Oliver pushed to his feet. "Very well," he said in a tight voice, then shook the flour from his hands with more force than necessary and left the kitchen, the door banging shut behind him.

His dramatic exit made me forget my flutteriness for a moment. "He's not usually so hot-headed," I commented before turning back to the task at hand. "I wonder what's gotten into him." I hoped he wasn't having second thoughts about lending me a shirt. I needed his help.

Hunter let out a soft chuckle. "I'm fairly certain it is *you* who's gotten under his skin."

"Me? What did I do?" Did he feel like I was using him, being unfair by asking for his help? That didn't make sense. He had offered it. Very willingly, in fact.

"You didn't *do* anything, aside from being someone he could admire." He gave me a look full of

meaning.

"Admire?" I asked, blinking at the implication. "He doesn't..."

"I believe young Oliver has feelings for you."

I sat abruptly on the floor. "No. We're friends...we've grown up together." He was helping me with a dishonest plan. Besides, it wasn't Oliver whose admiration I craved. It was Hunter's.

"Friends can turn into more," Hunter pointed out.

I shook my head. "He's nearly two years younger than I am. I've looked after him like I have all the boys."

Hunter stifled a laugh, but his grin came through. "Whatever you do, do not tell him that. No young man wants to know that the lady he admires sees him as a younger brother, or worse yet, a child."

But I did see him that way. Even though I was only barely older than some of them, I'd always seen those boys as...well...boys.

Hunter's voice broke into my thoughts. "Did you not notice the way he was watching you?"

No, because I was too distracted by the eye games you and I were playing. "Watching me how?"

"Like he was utterly disappointed you never turned your attention to him."

Oh dear. What if he had truly needed to speak with me and I'd told him to go? I grabbed a few more handfuls of flour and tossed them into the bowl. "I was busy trying to feed all of you."

"Is that why you spilled this flour? Because you were so focused on your work?" he teased.

I tossed several more vicious handfuls into the bowl. "No, the fault for this incident lies squarely on your shoulders." I took a handful and threw it at his chest. "You were the one distracting me," I said in a whisper. "I'd think that was obvious. And with how much you were looking at me, it's a wonder you even noticed where Oliver's gaze landed."

Hunter looked down at the splay of flour coating his shirt, then slowly back up at me.

I knew by the look in his eyes what he was thinking, so when he reached for the flour again, I grabbed his wrist. "Don't you dare," I warned, but it was too late.

His other hand grabbed up some flour and it puffed into my shoulder.

I glared, my nose scrunching when a smile threatened to cross my lips. I took my flour-covered hand and smeared it down one side of his face. "Perhaps we should call a truce before this gets out of hand."

He held my gaze for a moment, no doubt debating whether or not to toss another handful at me. "I suppose I'll be grateful you didn't pull your knife on me," he said as his mouth curved into a grin.

I chuckled. "That's probably wise." I dusted the flour from my shoulder then picked up the bowl and set it on the counter before grabbing the broom.

"Here." Hunter reached for the broom. "I'll do that so that you can get back to your work."

I handed it over, but before I could turn back to my task, he set a hand at my waist and leaned down to speak in my ear. "And I'm sorry if my constant need to catch your eye frazzled you."

It took me a moment to suck in my next breath. "It's fine," I breathed.

He pulled back. "I'll take care of this." He gave me a sheepish smile. "It is my fault, after all."

I cleared my throat, which felt swollen, and returned to work, trying not to think too hard about Hunter whispering in my ear, or his belief that Oliver admired me.

9

My morning sparring session with Falstone had gone particularly well, so there really was no reason for me to be frowning so formidably down at my cloak. I'd taken it off as soon as I got inside, but then got stuck before I could finish hanging it on the hook beside the door. It had been more than a week since the encounter with the Wolfe wagon and the subsequent tear to my cloak. Aunt Beatrice and I had done a good job repairing it, but it still made me sad.

Beatrice must have caught me staring forlornly down at the garment, because her heeled boots clicked closer before she took the edge of the fabric in one hand.

"You should put it away," she said.

I looked up at her, confused.

She gazed down on me with a sad and understanding smile. "This ought to be put away and kept safe. I know how much it means to you, and I would hate to see it lost or ruined."

"Like I've ruined it already," I asked.

"That just gives it character," she reassured me. "But despite your small frame, it is too short for you. It has been for a long time."

I only shrugged. "It's still warm."

"Not warm enough." She looked at me carefully, debating for several moments before she took a breath and then gestured toward the table. "Sit down."

I did as she asked, surprised when she continued to stand. That is, until she tentatively took her hand from behind her back to reveal a wrapped parcel, which she placed in my hands.

"What's this?"

"Just open it."

I untied the twine and pulled back the paper to find rich red fabric, heavy and high quality. I blinked in surprise. "What is this?"

She smiled. "Unfold it and see."

I did so and one end of the scarlet fabric slid to the floor as I held up the other end. It was a cloak. The most beautiful cloak I'd ever seen. "Beatrice, it's beautiful. Where did it come from?"

"I made it, silly girl. The princess helped me to purchase the fabric and Cecily insisted on doing a portion of the sewing. So really it's a gift from all of us."

I was speechless. It was the most magnificent gift I'd ever been given. I didn't deserve it.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

Like it? It was extraordinary. I had to blink back tears as I nodded vigorously.

Beatrice rubbed my arm. "So what do you say we put your sweet mother's cloak in a safe spot for you to pass to your daughter someday?"

I just nodded and stood up to hug her fiercely before drawing back so that I could admire it again, running my hands over the smooth fabric, allowing the metal latch to glint in the sunlight that filtered through the window.

"It's so bright," I said. "People will notice me."

"That's not a bad thing. You made yourself invisible for a long time and I understand why. But I think it's time to admit that a young girl who has the skill to beat grown men in swordplay is bound to attract some attention." The curve of her mouth and the glint of humor in her eyes made my own lips pull up at the corners.

She was right. It was easy to think of myself as the same girl who used to speak in as few words as possible; the girl who shrank into corners and kept her head down. It was all still a part of me, but I didn't have to let who I was dictate who I would be.

Oliver was the first to show up for lunch the next day. He came in as if in a hurry and looked around, seeming glad to find the table empty of other servants.

"Hi, Oliver," I greeted.

He crossed to me. "I'm glad I finally caught you alone," he said with a note of annoyance in his voice.

"Why's that?" I asked as Hunter's words about Oliver being interested in me bubbled up.

"We need to talk about the festival," he said quietly, his eyes cutting over to be sure that Miriam was busy.

"Oh, yes, of course." I leaned in, eager to confer about our subterfuge.

"Do you have boots?" he asked.

"Boots?"

"Boys' shoes are different than girls'. Do you need to borrow boots?"

"Oh." How had I not thought of that? "Yes, I suppose I do."

"And a hat?"

"I've been thinking on that, and I wonder if one of the younger boys' hats will fit me better than one of yours."

He shook his head. "You have all that hair. You'll need room in your hat to hide it. You can use one of mine."

I glanced down at my thick braid. "You're right. Thank you. And what about boots? Yours would be much too large."

"I'll see if I can get Ansel to lend me some. I won't tell him why," he said with a wink.

"Even his will be too big." Ansel was only eleven, but my feet were in proportion to my small size, while his were not.

"I know, but I think it's what you need to do. Wear some that are too big and stuff the toe. Otherwise your feet will look too small."

"Fine. But they can't be too much bigger, or it will make me clumsy."

He grinned. "Clumsiness might make your disguise even better. Young boys usually have feet they need to grow into, and with how short you are, they won't believe you're more than twelve."

His observation left me worried. "Will they let me compete if they think I'm only twelve?"

"They'll match you up with someone close to the age they think you are, and after you beat them easily, they'll have to put you in a match with someone older, more skilled."

That prospect made my heart leap in anticipation. I could hardly imagine it, but it was all I wanted, to truly test my skill.

The door opened and Ansel stepped inside, followed by Hunter.

Oliver leaned in and spoke quickly. "Come find me at the stables tomorrow, I'll have everything you need." Then he went to sit down.

Hunter watched Oliver find his seat at the table and then crossed over to me with a knowing look in

his eye. "What did I tell you?" he said, tipping his head toward the younger man.

"Hush," I said, unable to explain or defend Oliver's behavior without revealing more than I wished. "Go sit so you can appreciate my food."

He grinned. "I always do."

Oliver finished his lunch earlier than most the next day, excusing himself then giving me a distinct tilt of his head as he was closing the door behind him. I immediately saw the wisdom of his timing. If I met him now, most of the other grooms and stable boys would be here, still eating.

I waited a few minutes and then let Miriam know I was stepping out to fetch something. Once I was outside, I hurried to the stables. Stepping inside the dim interior, I waited for my eyes to adjust.

"Over here," Oliver said just before he took hold of my arm and towed me into the tack room.

"I can't believe you're willing to help me with this."

He snorted. "I can't believe you're audacious enough to do it. It's brilliant." He crouched in the corner and pulled a satchel from behind a sack of feed.

"You really don't mind?" I asked as I took a seat on a small stool.

He turned to me, his brow arched in confusion as he held out the satchel. "Do I seem like I mind?"

I shrugged. "You looked annoyed when you left the kitchen a few days ago."

He rolled his eyes. "That's because I wanted to talk to you about our plan, but Hunter seems to think he's got some sort of claim on you."

I didn't acknowledge his opinion of Hunter as that wasn't something I was willing to discuss with him. "I'm sorry about that. I was all scatterbrained and didn't realize til you'd gone that you might need to speak with me."

He waved that off. "It all worked out. Here." He gestured toward the door and I followed him into the main part of the stables. "Go into that stall and change into your disguise. I just cleaned it."

"Oh," I said, embarrassed. "I'm sure it will be fine."

He shook his head. "You're trying to pass as a boy when you're really not. Trust me, we want to see what it looks like before we go to the festival tomorrow."

He had a point. And what if something didn't fit? "Right." I headed to the stall. "I'll be quick."

"I'll be mucking another stall."

I pulled the items from the satchel. It seemed my partner in subterfuge had thought of everything. Thick wool stockings. Shirt. Jacket. Boots. Hat.

I was lucky that I'd long ago acquired britches that fit me since that was the most challenging part. I opted to keep my stays and short chemise on under the linen shirt, hoping the extra layers would hide my figure. Still, I was grateful for the jacket. It made my shoulders broader and hid my small waist.

Once I'd tucked and tied and had everything in place, I came out of the stall and sat on a bench.

"You can't wear your hair like that."

I looked over my shoulder to see Oliver with his head sticking out of a stall. I rolled my eyes at him even as I started to unbraid my hair. "I know that. That's why I'm changing it."

He ducked back inside the stall and I made quick work of turning my one braid into two. Then I looped the two braids around my head, weaving the ends into the hair close to my scalp before donning the hat. I stood and tucked the last few stands beneath the cap. "Do I look like a boy?"

Oliver came out of the stall, leaning on his pitchfork as he looked me over. "You'll want to slouch and keep your face down as much as possible. And rub some dirt over your face when it's time." A grin suddenly stretched his mouth. "What'll your name be?"

"Uh..."

He laughed. "Think on it. You don't want to be stumped if an official asks for your name."

"Right."

He nodded to the stable doors. "You'd better change back before the rest of them come back from eating your good cooking."

I hurried to comply, suddenly nervous at the prospect of being discovered in such an odd situation. I couldn't exactly explain away such behavior without confessing my entire plan.

When I emerged, again looking like the girl I was and carrying a loaded satchel on my shoulder, Oliver just shook his head. "Give it to me," he said, his hand outstretched.

"Give what to you?"

"The satchel. I'll keep it and bring it to the festival tomorrow. You'll look too out of place."

I handed it over, my palms sweating. "*I will* be out of place."

He raised an eyebrow. "Nervous?"

"Very."

"You'll do good."

I truly hoped he was right. Either way, I would find out the following afternoon.

10

It was the first day of the week-long harvest festival, and I was doing my best to squish myself into a wagon with the other Sutton employees. Princess Marilee and Sir James were going with Seraphina and had given the entire staff the day off so that any who wished to could attend.

When Oliver climbed into the bed of the wagon with a wink and a firm hold on the satchel containing my disguise, a portion of my nervous energy dissipated.

The ride was bound to be bumpy and crowded, but all the servants were in high spirits. I was doing my best to push aside all thoughts of the competition, but found myself unable to do so until Hunter jumped into the wagon bed and settled himself right beside me. He looked me over, wrapped in my new red cloak.

“It was a gift from Beatrice,” I said by way of explanation.

“It suits you,” he said, resting his arm on the edge of the wagon behind my back.

I looked away to prevent a blush from rising.

“Do you all attend the festival every year?” Miriam asked as she sat herself in front of me.

“Yes. This will be my fourth year.”

“I haven’t been since we left Father,” Miriam said. “I look forward to not working.” She bounced a little in excitement. Her casual mention of the father they’d left behind surprised me. She seemed to be less affected by that subject than her brother was. Hunter had shielded her from much, but it seemed doubtful her memories of that time could have affected her so little. Perhaps she simply remembered little of it.

I fell silent, content to let the conversation of others swirl around me as I breathed in the crisp air. The weather would be lovely in just a few hours, but there was still a chill in the air this early in the morning. The ride into the village wouldn’t take long and I was content to sit here, my shoulder bumping up against Hunter’s side with each rut.

The warmth of Hunter’s arm seeped into my back, where it rested on the wagon’s edge. It was a comfort to have his arm there and I found myself calm and at peace. That is, until he moved his arm from behind me. I missed the warmth immediately. Then my cloak shifted where it covered my hand, and suddenly his fingers were brushing over my own where they sat at my side. At first I thought it was an accident, the contact a result of the wagon’s movements, but his hand didn’t withdraw. His fingertips ran down the back of one of my fingers and then up the next, his movements small.

My breath hitched and I glanced around, wondering if anyone had noticed, but of course no one had. Someone would have had to stare at the space between his leg and mine to notice where our hands came together. I glanced down between us as his fingers continued their trek across the back of my hand and realized that the folds of my cloak were concealing both of our hands. Even if someone looked, they would not be the wiser.

My heart pounded harder as his hand slid around mine, his fingers now grazing my palm.

My skin tingled, not just on my hand, but up my spine and into my scalp. How could such a small caress wreak such havoc?!

He threaded his fingers through mine, fitting our hands together seamlessly.

My cheeks were on fire.

After a few moments he leaned down so that only I would hear his words. “Is this all right?”

All I could do was nod. It was more than all right. It was...wonderful. And terrifying and exhilarating and *what did it mean?*

I shoved that last question aside and closed my eyes, breathing in the fresh air and sinking into the feeling of his thumb slowly skimming over the back of my hand.

“You’re being very quiet,” he murmured after a few minutes.

I cut my eyes over to him for the briefest of moments before my shyness got the best of me and I had to look away again. I just shook my head since my voice wasn’t working.

He started to loosen his grip on my hand as if to draw away, but I tightened mine to keep him in place. My voice might be paralyzed, but my hand wasn’t.

He squeezed my hand in return and then angled his body toward me a little more, making it easier for him to speak close to my ear. “Should I be worried about what Oliver will think if he sees us?”

I looked up at him. “What?” I asked in a whisper. “No. What do you mean?”

He gave a little shrug even as his hand curled more fully around mine. “I saw you two in the stables.”

“Oh. That wasn’t—” Saints, how could I explain it?

“So I shouldn’t worry that you’ve been holding *his* hand?”

“Of course not,” I said with a nervous smile. “I’ve never—” My cheeks flamed.

He gave a curious tilt of his head. “Has no one ever held your hand before?”

This time when I looked at him, I was able to hold his gaze. His eyes were curious, but also intense, like he wanted to know...everything.

I shook my head to answer his question.

His brow jumped. “Why ever not?”

I was about to answer when Miriam spoke up. “What are you two talking about?”

We both jerked our heads in her direction, and I reflexively tried to pull my hand out of his, but he held on and I was glad. If I’d let go, the opportunity to hold his hand might never present itself again.

“Just talking about what we’d like to do at the festival,” Hunter lied smoothly. “What will you do first?”

A teasing glint was in her eye when she looked at him. “Identify potential marks,” she said in a sweetly innocent voice.

My stomach twisted in alarm at her casual mention of thievery.

Hunter just closed his eyes and sighed. “Miri,” he said, a warning woven through his voice.

“Laws, Hunter, I’m only joking. I shall go for the food first.” She bumped her shoulder into Oliver’s. “What about you, Oliver?”

I turned my gaze to Oliver and found him looking at me, his face more stoic than I was used to seeing on him. But then he looked away and put on a smile for Miriam before chiming in with his answer. Soon everyone started talking over one another, recommending this booth or that competition. I didn’t hear much of it because my attention was focused not only on the challenge of entering the contest, but also on the immediate sensation of the hand that held mine and the young man who sat with his arm pressed to my shoulder.

The fair was a cacophony of sound and color. It was set up at the edge of Murrwood Forest, just outside the village. The trees were sparse enough to offer plenty of room for tents to be erected but

plentiful enough to offer shade for those who sought it. Tradesmen and performers all flew their brightly painted banners over their stand or wagon. Hunter and I wandered the booths with many of the other Sutton servants. We passed by a wood carver who had his finished products set on display while demonstrating the making of them. A couple, well on in years, sold food. A few individual performers wandered around, showing off their magic tricks or tottering on stilts.

Lively music saturated the air along with the din of voices, the hammering of metal, and the clashing of weapons. The competitions would start soon and continue throughout the day. Doing well in any competition was a chance for a few moments of fame in our village. Everyone wanted to be the best at something. Sword. Staff. Bow and arrow.

I was grateful that my red cloak hid the sword that swung from my belt.

"Look at these," Hunter said, pulling me over to a stall where a gentleman with a white beard was dipping candles. The array of sizes and shapes of candles he presented was impressive, but it was the seals on display that Hunter was interested in.

"Don't you have to have a family crest to seal letters with?" I asked.

"These are just for fun," the bearded man answered. "I just do simple little designs, never get close to making something that might look like a real crest. I'd get into a mighty big bit of trouble if I did that."

Hunter and I examined them. There were lots of little flowers, some circles made out of vines. Lots of single letters in fancy script, but nothing so elaborate that it might be mistaken for a crest.

The man rested his hands on the table and eyed the two of us. "Could be used for sending love notes. Gives it a nice touch." He winked.

"Can't read," both Hunter and I responded, then looked at each other and laughed at our coordinated answer.

"They are lovely, though," I complimented the man.

He nodded his head in acknowledgment then went back to work.

As we stepped away from the wax tent, Hunter slipped his hand around mine once more.

We moved on, joining Miriam and the others where they had stopped to admire a pair of performers. One played the flute while the other danced with scarves in her hands and tinkling chains around her ankles.

I knew, even as I experienced it, that whenever I looked back on this day, the joy, color and laughter of these moments would be inextricably tied to the fluttering in my stomach and the nervous heat in my chest that resulted from Hunter's attention. It was new and unexpected and I wanted to remember all of it.

The man in the center of the ring was dressed as a poor imitation of a knight. I frowned as he dispatched his third opponent in less than five minutes. I wouldn't begrudge the man his victories if he'd been taking on opponents who matched his skill, but he wasn't. His little spectacle was set up as a sort of training arena for young people. When I'd first heard of it, I thought it would be much like what Falstone did. I expected that the "knight" would go easy on his opponents, give them a bit of confidence, teach them a thing or two before eventually winning and parting with a handshake.

Instead, this buffoon encouraged even the youngest competitors to try their hand at fighting and then took great pleasure in humiliating them as he defeated them with only a few strokes. Sometimes he even added a kick to their backside before he laughed them on their way with a grin and a "better luck next year."

Miriam had insisted on going to watch the archery competition, and Hunter had insisted on going

with her. Pryce and his children had watched for only a few minutes before Pryce shook his head in disgust and led Ansel and Lindy away. Only I had remained behind, not because I enjoyed the spectacle but because I didn't—and I had a horrible feeling down in my gut that I was going to do something about it.

I sucked up my courage, removed my cloak, and tied up the front of my skirt as the false knight sent yet another hopeful child away disappointed. There were several more young lads deciding if they wanted to take on the knight or not, so I took advantage of their indecision and entered the circle he'd drawn on the ground, selecting the shortest of the three wooden swords that he had for his opponents to choose from. Most chose the largest, thinking the weight of the sword would help instead of hinder them. Even this shorter sword was heavier than I would have preferred. I adjusted my grip and weighed it in my hand as the knight's face lit up with a grin. "Well, look what we have here," he called out, turning in a circle so that all around could hear. "A young miss wants to see if she can defeat the great knight."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. He wasn't a great *anything*, and he certainly wasn't a knight. He was probably a washed-up soldier who had drunk himself out of the good graces of the army. He certainly wasn't very observant, else he would have noticed the sword belt I'd discarded just outside his little arena.

The crowd responded with a smattering of cheers mixed with a few jeers.

"Well, come on then." He waved me forward. "Let's see what you've got."

Saints, I hoped I was up for this. I'd been studying his technique and was fairly confident I could offer him a fair fight, but I was practical enough to know that I wouldn't know for certain until he decided to attack full force. My plan was to draw out the fight as long as possible. I would defend just enough to not lose the battle in the hopes it would take him a long time to realize what exactly it was he was up against.

Was it terrible of me to want to humiliate him? Probably. Yet I couldn't manage to drum up any remorse.

I stepped forward and attacked, raising my sword and swinging it toward him—much more slowly than I normally would. He caught my fake blade against his before hefting me away from him with dramatic bravado. I retreated and waited for him to come at me, which he did almost immediately, making the arc of his sword big and showy. If I'd wanted to, I could have used that opening to take a swipe at his chest; instead I just parried and deflected and then retreated again.

"Oh ho! Someone's taught the sweet little miss a thing or two about how to swing a sword," he said as he backed up and circled.

I remained silent. Not out of intimidation; this bully was pathetic. No, my silence was strategic. I'd discovered over the years that taunting back just made me look weak and desperate. Not only that, but having a man taunt me while I barely reacted made him look the fool instead.

I waited for him to advance again, knowing he wouldn't be able to wait long before trying to assert his dominance again. When he did come forward, it was with less flare and more precision. We clashed swords five times, him advancing, me retreating before I dodged left, forcing his sword to bite into the ground at my right where I kicked at the weapon, knocking it from his hand before retreating.

Now he was angry. Men did so hate to be bested by a woman, especially when that woman looked a lot like a little girl.

Jeers sounded again, but this time they were directed at Mr. Knight instead of at me.

He retrieved his sword with a growl and swung around to face me, his neck a mottled red and his

nostrils flared. He came at me again, his movements deliberate and controlled. He was trying to look as if he wasn't straining himself, but he was. He lacked much of the basic technique required to conserve energy and funnel your power from your feet, through your body and all the way to the tip of your sword. I was starting to doubt that he'd ever even been a soldier.

I stepped carefully as I parried and thrust, always maintaining my balance. The moment he made a more wild swing, I brought my hands apart, swinging my sword one-handed to knock his sword out of the way. Then I planted my right foot in the middle of his stomach.

His eyes bulged as he doubled over and stumbled.

I fell into my stance once again and brought my sword back to the ready. Glancing around, I noticed with satisfaction that the crowd had tripled in size, but it was Hunter's gaze that snagged my attention. There was worry in his eyes, but more than that, there was heat there. I'd never seen such raw admiration before, but I couldn't dwell on it.

Mr. Knight had regained his balance and was huffing like an angry stallion. He circled and I did the same, for the first time starting to worry that angering this man might not have been in my best interest. Desperate fighters were unpredictable. Perhaps it was time to go on the offensive. I gripped my sword tighter and was on the verge of advance when a man stepped between myself and my opponent.

"She's beaten you, Taylor," the man said, low enough that likely most of the spectators didn't hear. "Walk away before you embarrass yourself more." He turned his head enough that I could see his profile. It was one of the Wolfe brothers. Morley, I believed.

The fake knight, Taylor, glared at Morley, then at me, before putting on a fake smile. "I wouldn't want the miss to be hurt," he said in a loud voice. "Best to call it a draw." He didn't bother with a handshake or a salute, just turned and left the ring, crossing the short distance to a canvas tent. He threw the flap aside and ducked in.

Morley turned to face me, his brow raised in surprise, mouth set in an impressed frown.

"I didn't need rescuing," I pointed out, even though I felt a fair amount of relief that it was over. He grinned. "I was rescuing him, not you."

I snorted, mollified by his wit and the compliment that went with it. I tipped my head in the direction of the tent. "He a friend of yours?"

"Friend, no. Only acquainted from attending so many of the same festivals. His act isn't as good as ours." He gave me a cocky grin.

"I haven't seen your wagon yet."

"It's just over there." He pointed off to my right. "Come over soon," he said, backing away. "You won't want to miss the show." He winked and hurried off.

Several bystanders gave me a nod or a wink. Some others looked either confused or disapproving. One little boy came up and pumped my hand in congratulations. After he ran off, I remembered that my skirt was still tied up and set the borrowed sword aside before undoing the ties and letting it fall to my ankles. I put on my belt and pulled my cloak around my shoulders as I searched the dissipating crowd for Hunter. I spotted him as he approached, the same heat in his eyes that I'd glimpsed earlier.

"How was the archery competition?" I asked as he drew closer.

He didn't answer, just stepped near enough to take my hand in his as he looked down into my face.

I relished the warmth of his hand in mine but swallowed at his intensity, even before he lowered his mouth to my ear. "That was impressive," he said.

"You've seen me fight before," I pointed out in an attempt to make the tension between us dissipate.

"Believe me," he said, his breath hitting my neck. "This was *very* different." He pulled back slowly and tugged on my hand, prompting me to fall into step beside him. "You fight in britches," he

said while keeping his eyes ahead of him.

Flames devoured my cheeks at his blunt statement. I'd never been embarrassed over the modifications I'd made to my wardrobe before. It was a matter of practicality and I'd been doing it since I was thirteen. But having it pointed out by the young man holding my hand was mortifying for some reason. "It's not as though I fight in *only* britches," I defended myself, willing the red to leave my face. Never mind the fact that I was fully planning to fight dressed like a boy later in the day.

He glanced over at me. "My intent was not to embarrass you. Or shame you. I think it's ingenious."

It was to his credit that he made the statement without even a hint of sensuality in the observation. "Thank you," I managed as my embarrassment cooled.

He kept my hand in his as we wandered through tents and stalls, stopping to purchase a bit of food, accepting a flower from a man on stilts.

I started keeping an eye out for Princess Marilee and her family.

"Looking for someone?" Hunter asked as I craned my neck to look behind us once more.

"Yes. I haven't seen Her Highness or Sir James since we've been here."

"They were at the archery competition earlier."

"Oh, that's right. The princess was the Lady Paramount, was she not?" I asked, recalling that she'd been asked to fill the position of honorary judge.

He nodded.

"And where did Miriam go?"

"With Johnny and Gretchen. We ran into them at the archery competition. One of their friends made third place. They're all over the moon about it."

"That's amazing."

"Not as amazing as seeing you trounce a fully grown man who's parading around as a knight."

"Stop," I begged, my cheeks heating. "It was nothing."

"It was magnificent."

I looked at the position of the sun and determined that we had plenty of time before the sword competition started. "Come on," I said, pulling him in the direction Morley had suggested. "Let's watch the Wolfe brothers' performance."

He let out a sigh. "If we must."

"You don't want to?" I asked, confused. "With such an interesting wagon, their display is bound to be impressive."

"Do you have anything on you that can be stolen?"

I pulled my chin back. "What?"

"Coins? Jewelry?"

"No, I left all my gems at home."

He snorted. "They'll steal trinkets just as sure as they'll steal gems."

"What are you talking about?"

"The bigger the display, the more distracted people will be. The more distracted people are, the easier their pockets are to pick."

My chin pulled back. "You're saying the Wolfe brothers will be stealing from their audience while they are performing?"

"Or other opportunists will. Or they'll be working with someone," he said as if it was a matter of fact and not his own speculation. "Are they the only two in the act?"

"I've no idea. I've never seen it before." Why did he lay such accusations at their feet?

"Right. My point is, watch your pockets."

"I'm carrying nothing of value, so there is nothing to watch." I *owned* nothing of value aside from the cloak secured around my neck, and I would defy anyone to take that without my noticing. "What makes you so sure of this anyway?" I asked.

He let out a sigh, staring at the branches overhead. "I don't want to tell you." The stiff way he held his mouth made me realize how obtuse I was being. He'd told me about his father.

"Oh," I said as realization stuck me. "Your father?"

He cut his eyes over to me, then away again. "My father was a thief in other ways. And I grew up in his care. I know all too well how it works."

"Oh."

A sad smile stretched his mouth.

"Did you..." I let the unfinished question sit in the space between us.

"Yes. I was a pickpocket. Miri too." He let out a hefty sigh. "It was what our father required of us."

I chewed on all the implications of this revelation, remembering what he'd told me before of his early life. "So, is that why you wanted to leave?" I was too curious not to ask. "Even before you knew what your father had planned for Miri?"

"It was one of the reasons. For years, stealing was just a means to an end. It's how we provided for ourselves. But then I grew a conscience, and on top of that, I simply grew weary of my father's demands. I started to truly hate that he was turning Miri into a thief. A good thief at that." A corner of his mouth turned up, as though the thought amused him at the same time that it made him sad.

I was about to ask him more about it, but a conversation behind us caught both our ears.

"Look, Papa!" A young girl said with excitement.

I looked toward the Wolfe wagon, expecting to see the show starting, but there was no movement at the beastly contraption.

"She's the one who took on the knight," the girl said. "Humiliated him good and proper."

Hunter's hand tightened around mine as we both realized the girl was talking about me. I smiled, but that didn't last long.

The girl's father snorted. "Any *proper* young woman would never show her knees in such a fashion."

My eyes widened at the man's rudeness, but I kept my attention forward, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I had heard his jab.

"But she was fighting," the young girl stated as though that explained and excused the baring of my knees.

"Well, perhaps she shouldn't be." He sounded as if my fighting was a personal affront to him. "A girl should be learning her way around the kitchen, not taking up a sword."

Hunter and I looked at each other, wide-eyed as we tried not to laugh.

"Come along." The man scooted his daughter through the crowd to find a different spot, no doubt fearing my heathen ways would rub off on the impressionable girl.

As soon as they were a ways off, we burst into a fit of laughter.

"Really, little Emeline," Hunter said with mock severity. "You should heed the man's advice. You've clearly been neglecting your kitchen skills if you can wield a sword in such a fashion."

"I am woefully inadequate when it comes to the kitchen," I lamented.

"And those knees. So provocative when covered in boys' britches."

I sputtered a laugh and then sobered. "I do feel sorry for that girl."

"Why?"

"Because she sounds like me, and she has a father who clearly won't appreciate it," I mused as I

looked over my shoulder at where the girl had disappeared in the crowd.

"Look." Hunter nodded in the direction of the wagon beast. "They're starting."

11

I looked to the beast and saw Daggon jump up onto the seat of the wagon and stand, his feet wide, his arms raised for attention. His regular clothing had been replaced by a costume of ripped fabrics and strange leather straps that belted his chest and one thigh. “Fair revelers!” he called out. “Thank you for your attention. You are well met and we are anxious to share our secrets with you, but first!” He raised a dramatic finger in the air. “We must pay the beast!” He indicated the wagon beneath him, which at that moment started to move. Not like a wagon, but like a creature. The parts of its wooden body that looked like forelegs and paws moved up and down, while at the same time a low moaning roar came from inside.

It was truly a spectacle. Simply the shape of the wagon had seemed fantastical enough, but to see it come to life was impressive indeed. The movement only lasted a few moments, giving the audience just enough of a taste that they would want more.

“The beast requires payment!” Daggon shouted again. “My sister is enslaved to the beast and cannot be freed until its greed is fed.” His sister climbed onto the top of the wagon from behind, looking young, lovely and distressed as she struck a pose with the back of her hand to her forehead, her loose blonde hair hanging down her back. Her costume, too, was made of ripped strips and pieces of colorful fabric hanging down her skirt and wrapping around her upper body. Bangles circled her wrists and chains wrapped from her shoulder and down her arm. I grinned. These siblings were performers at heart, and this show promised to be quite spectacular.

Morley appeared atop the wagon and Daggon called out, “Go, Elise! Collect the donations that we might set you free from this evil.”

The brothers each took hold of one of Elise’s arms and she jumped, eliciting gasps from many of the audience members, but with her brothers’ assistance, the movement was so well coordinated that she seemed to fairly float to the ground before fluttering about with a bag held out, pleading here and demurring there. It was clear she knew which patrons to hold her purse out to. She didn’t bother approaching Hunter or me, or anyone who looked like us. She knew which pockets would be lined with coins, and within only a few minutes, in which her brothers set up the backstory for the tale they were about to tell, Elise had collected enough that she returned to the wagon.

“See?” I nudged Hunter’s shoulder. “They didn’t need to pick any pockets.”

He smiled but shook his head. “It’s clever, I’ll grant them that.”

It was more than just clever. Their beast of a wagon was a wonder. It roared, probably due to one of the brothers blowing a horn from inside. The pieces over the wheels that were shaped like paws moved up and down, making it appear as though it walked. It even reared up at one point, the front end lifting higher than the back, as they told the harrowing tale of how Elise had been captured by the great beast while walking through the woods on a beautiful sunlit day. It had kept her prisoner, only allowing her to wander at night when the world wasn’t bright enough for her to find her way. Then came the battle between the brothers and the beast. That’s when the front of the beast wagon reared up, and I was completely sucked into their performance. But that wasn’t even the best part. As their

tale came to an end and they presented the beast with the offering of money, depositing the pretty purse into its gaping mouth, Elise ducked out of the way just in time before a plume of fire shot from between its teeth.

Everyone gasped in delight and shock before bursting into applause and whistles of appreciation.

Hunter and I turned to each other, both wide-eyed as we continued to clap. "Well," Hunter said, a bit breathless. "They certainly know how to put on a show, don't they?"

"It was marvelous! How do you suppose they did it?"

"The fire?"

I nodded.

"Probably the same way the fire breathers do, but it was so cleverly concealed that no one saw it coming."

"And now!" Daggon shouted from atop the wagon as the applause died down. "We must continue our journey and hope to find more damsels to rescue from horrid beasts. So please, if you enjoyed our story, help us to satiate the demands of the monsters we're bound to find along the way."

Elise appeared again with her purse, this time thanking people profusely for their donations.

"I'm certain they make the most money of anyone here," Hunter commented.

I nodded, having no doubt that was true. They would also bring in money peddling their wares, but it seemed obvious that Morley had spoken truthfully when he asserted that the Wolfe family were performers first and peddlers second.

I wondered about the sort of life they must live—so different from my own. I imagined it was much more exciting, but also much more difficult. I did crave a bit of excitement once in a while, but having the constancy of a roof over my head and a steady wage far outweighed any desire for adventure.

"Shall we go?" I asked. "It looks as if their performance is over."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "I'm certain there are many curiosities we have not yet seen."

Hunter placed a hand to my lower back and turned us away from the spectacle.

"Hey, Red. Wait up," said a voice from behind us, but I easily ignored it until a hand gripped my arm.

I dislodged the grip and spun, reaching for the knife at my belt. My movements were arrested by the sight of Morley Wolfe, grinning at me.

"What did you think?" he asked eagerly, seemingly unaware that I'd almost pulled a weapon on him.

I blinked and gathered my thoughts. "It was extraordinary. Brilliant, really."

"Red?" Hunter asked, his expression not the least bit welcoming toward the man who'd stopped our departure.

Morley shrugged, his eyes still on me. "Pardon my rudeness. I can't recall your name, so I thought Red was appropriate." He grinned again as he eyed my cloak. "New, is it?"

"Yes." I blushed at the attention but managed to keep my voice. "A gift from my aunt."

"It suits you, Miss..." He leaned in even as he trailed off.

It took me a moment to realize he was waiting for me to give him my name. "Emeline," I said when the realization struck.

"Emeline." He grinned, took my hand and bowed over it, not the least bit concerned that Hunter stood beside me, glowering. "It was a pleasure to see you again. I hope you enjoyed the show." He took off his hat and swept into a bow before trotting back toward the beast.

I shook my head with a smile. But when I turned to Hunter, he was frowning deeply, clearly perturbed.

What had gotten his britches in a twist? “What’s wrong?”

He gave me a smile that was really more of a grimace. “He’s good at what he does.”

“What do you mean?”

“The charm. The flattery.”

I pulled back, hurt by his words. “So,” I forced myself to ask, “You think his words were just empty flattery?”

His face fell. “What? No. No, no. That’s not what I meant. The cloak is more beautiful for having you in it, believe me.” His offhand and entirely genuine compliment left me a little off balance. “But the way he acted as though his acquaintance with you was more than it is, that’s the sort of charming manipulation learned by many festival rats.”

“Festival rats?” That seemed rather rude.

He shrugged. “It’s what people called us.”

“Oh.” Perhaps not so rude after all. It was still strange to think of Hunter as a boy, trained to be a pickpocket by his own father. I looked around at the bright tents and cheering crowds, trying to see it the way he might. “Do you enjoy being here?”

He looked down at me, his eyes studying my face. “I enjoy being with you.”

My heart panged, but I kept my train of thought. “But what’s it like to be here, on the other side of things?”

He gave that some thought, looking around him. “I don’t hate it. I thought I might, but being here is something of a relief. It’s familiar, but since I’m not a part of it, I don’t feel the shame or pressure to earn. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” I wrapped my bravery around myself and slipped my hand around his.

His face opened in surprise.

I tugged on his hand until he fell into step beside me.

“Where shall we go now?” he asked, suddenly in a much better mood. “Are you going to find another knight to bring to his knees with your sword?”

“No,” I laughed. “I just want to see what else is here.”

We proceeded hand in hand and I did my best to let him lead, allowing him to take me to the booths and performances that he was comfortable with, paying attention when he tugged me in a different direction than the one I’d anticipated. This was the world he used to live in, the world he grew up in. It was bright and happy right now, but I wondered what day-to-day life would have been like, traveling from one town to another, unsure when you’d earn enough for your needs.

Hunter seemed to gravitate toward the food stalls, which suited me just fine. I was able to sample new dishes and think up new flavor combinations that I might try once I was back in my own kitchen. We found some candied fruit, and after trying them, I was determined to recreate them for Princess Marilee and Sir James.

Then we found Miss Garnet. Her banner was painted with an all-seeing eye, and her booth hung with chimes and scarves that both floated in the slight breeze. She sat behind her table, looking every inch the mystic that some believed her to be. She’d taken some sort of black ink or paint and drawn a swirling design across her forehead and down one side of her face. Feathers and leaves were woven through her hair and...was that a live caterpillar on one of those leaves?

“Hello, Miss Garnet,” I greeted. Yes, that was a plump blue-green caterpillar settled into the leaves that adorned her head.

She looked up and a radiant smile brightened her face. “Hello, my dears!” She stood and stretched a hand toward each of us, looking so eager that we had no choice but to each accept one of her hands.

Since Hunter and I had been hand in hand before now, we ended up in a circle, Garnet leaning over her flower-strewn table to reach us.

She squeezed our hands and closed her eyes, tilting her head just a little in concentration. Hunter and I both looked at one another, smiling at her antics.

Miss Garnet abruptly dropped both of our hands and pulled away. "My dears!" she exclaimed.

"What?" I asked in alarm, looking down at my hand as though it would give me answers.

"Someone hunts you," she declared in a warning whisper.

"I beg your pardon?" Hunter asked, looking more than a little skeptical.

Garnet continued, her eyes wide. "It lurks in the shadows, stalking your movements."

My initial alarm was wearing off. A warning of an *intangible something or other* from a woman making money off of her reputation as a mystic was not something I was prone to take seriously. "And what does this something want?" I asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

"To tear you apart, my dear." She placed a jewel-bedecked hand to her chest, distress pouring off of her.

"To tear me apart?" A corner of my mouth curled up in disbelief.

"No." She reached forward, snatching both of our hands again. "It is determined to tear *the two of you*"—she looked back and forth between myself and Hunter—"apart. To separate you."

"Well," I said, somewhat at a loss. I usually liked Garnet, but I did not particularly like her making predictions of doom and gloom over me, especially when I hadn't come to her for any sort of fortune-telling thrill. "Thank you for that. We'll be careful."

I pulled my hand back but she clung to it. "Care will not be enough," she warned in a dire whisper.

"Well then," Hunter interrupted, carefully dislodging Garnet's hold on me as he spoke. "We will be excessively vigilant to guard against any threat. You have my word." He bowed gallantly over the woman's hand even as he backed away, taking me with him.

I couldn't help but look over my shoulder as we went. Miss Garnet continued to stand, her eyes slightly glazed, one hand still stretched in our direction.

"What in the world?" I finally breathed out my astonishment. "I have heard rumors of Miss Garnet giving warnings, but that is *not* what I expected."

"Does it worry you?" he asked.

I looked to him. "Of course not. You?"

There was a misplaced crease between his eyebrows. "No. No, not worried. Just...surprised."

"You and me both. It was the—"

"Watch out there!"

Hunter and I both looked up just in time to see the horse and rider barreling toward us. We moved almost as one, holding on to each other as we spun out of the way. His back collided into a broad-trunked tree, stopping his movement and causing me to bump into his chest.

"Oof!"

His arm circled me, preventing me from stumbling to the side.

"Sorry," I muttered as I looked up at him.

He was looking over my head, so I followed his gaze. The horse and rider continued to weave through the crowd with reckless haste.

"That was closer than I would have liked." He looked down at me.

I huffed a laugh. "Do you suppose that was the thing *hunting* us?" I widened my eyes at him to add some drama.

A slow smile curved his lips. "If so..." He paused as the air around us charged and I became

acutely aware that my body still leaned into his. “They’ve done a terrible job. Weren’t they supposed to tear us apart?”

“It does seem to have achieved the opposite,” I said, trying to decide if I should extricate myself or not. Part of me wanted to flee as nerves crawled up my spine, making me tremble, but the other part wanted to settle down right here and never leave.

He kept his hands latched behind my back as he shifted his feet to a wider stance, making himself short enough that it was no longer a strain for me to look up at him. “Hello, Red.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “That’s not my name.”

“It could be your fighting name. *Little Red*,” he announced with gusto.

I chuckled. “That is the least fierce name I’ve ever heard.” Though it didn’t prevent me from imagining myself in the middle of a competition with people cheering my name.

He brushed my thick braid behind my shoulder. “It suits you.” Then he slid his hand around the back of my neck and dipped his head closer.

Saints above, he’s going to kiss me. I had only a moment to contemplate this reality before I felt a tug on my waist.

Hunter must have noticed the movement too, because both of us turned, reaching out to catch the little boy who had managed to slip my knife from its sheath.

The tiny thief fought fiercely, but both Hunter and I each had a hold on one of his arms. I grabbed hold of his hand that was gripped around my knife handle. “Young man,” I said in my sternest voice.

He stilled, looking up at me with deeply disappointed and guilty eyes.

I knelt down so he could easily see my face and held the knife up in front of him. “This is my property and you cannot have it.”

“Fine,” he pouted, relinquishing his hold on it. “Keep your filthy knife. I didn’t want it in the first place. Now, let me go!” He tried to twist away again, but his thin frame wasn’t any match for the grip we had on him.

His lies and bravado were almost endearing. It nearly made me smile, but the truth was that I wanted to weep for this boy. He couldn’t have been more than seven years old.

“Hey,” Hunter finally spoke up, getting the boy’s attention. “If you promise me that you won’t steal anything else today”—he pulled a coin from his pocket and held it in front of him—“you can have this.”

The boy snatched at the coin, but Hunter pulled it out of reach. “Your word, young man.”

The boy nodded vigorously. “Promise,” he said in an awed whisper.

“Very well. Be careful where you spend it. Don’t let it be wasted.” He placed the coin in the boy’s hand and quick as a flash, the boy was gone, darting through legs and around tents until he was well out of sight.

Hunter let out a deep sigh as he stood. “It won’t do any good.”

“What won’t?” I asked, trying not to let the emotion clogging my throat be heard.

“The coin,” he said, staring at where the boy had disappeared in the crowd. “It will be a good day today, but tomorrow he’ll have to go back to what he knows.”

“You found another way.”

He finally turned to look at me, doing his best to smile. “We all do what we must.”

“Shall we find Miriam and the others?” I asked, partially as a distraction and partially because I needed to slip away. The sword competition was coming up.

“Yes. Let’s do.” He took my hand and started walking, in no hurry at all.

We found Miriam and the others, and I was glad to see that Oliver was among their group. He

looked decidedly relieved when he saw Hunter and me through the crowd.

As we joined them, Miriam immediately caught Hunter's attention and started telling him about what she'd seen, speaking with such animation that all eyes were on her.

Oliver stepped up to me and spoke quietly. "How do you propose you slip away without him noticing?"

It should not have surprised me that he commented so freely on what Hunter's reaction might be. After all, Hunter and I had spent most of the day together, hand in hand. "I don't know," I admitted. I hadn't expected to be so very attached to Hunter throughout the day, so it had never occurred to me that leaving his side might cause suspicion.

"You could just go now," he said, offering me the satchel that hung on his shoulder.

I shook my head. If I just disappeared, Hunter might get worried. "It will be better if I have an excuse. Perhaps—"

Before I could finish, Oliver raised his voice so the others could hear. "I have something I need Emeline to help me with. We'll catch up with the rest of you later." He gave an easy grin and a wave as he tugged me away. It took me only a moment to shake off my surprise and fall into step beside him.

Hunter's voice called after us. "But where—"

"We won't be long," I answered over my shoulder, trying to give the same easy grin that Oliver had. I'd spent enough time with most of these people that it shouldn't be suspicious, me helping Oliver. We were all friends; we all helped each other when needed. However, Hunter was another matter. We'd been having a lovely day together, and he was the one who had suggested Oliver had deeper feelings for me. I had no doubt I had just left Hunter confused, and possibly hurt.

But I was out of time. I couldn't miss this competition, and Oliver was the one willing to help me.

12

We had to go to the edge of the festival tents before I was able to find a spot secluded enough that I felt comfortable changing.

Oliver stood guard.

"You know," I said as I pulled the boys' shirt over my head, "I've never actually used my sword against a real opponent before."

"You'll have a helmet, and padding," he said from the other side of the tent.

My brow shot up. "I will?"

"Haven't you watched the competitions before?" His voice sounded bewildered.

"Well..." I cast back through my memories. "Yes, but I suppose I'd forgotten that part. And I didn't watch last year. After they refused to let me compete, I didn't stick around to watch those who were allowed."

"I wouldn't have been so eager to help if I thought someone might really slice you in half," he chuckled.

"No one is going to slice me in half."

"You're the one who just said you were nervous about using a real sword."

I stiffened a bit at his words. "I never said I was nervous."

He gave a half-groan, half-sigh. "Emeline. I'm trying to help. Why are you arguing with me?"

I let out a sigh, knowing he had a point. "Sorry." I pulled on the jacket and then buttoned it before securing my belt over my hips. I stuffed my skirt, blouse and shoes into the satchel, then put on the too-big boots, adjusting the stuffing in the toe and tying them tight. Then I clomped my way around the tent.

Oliver looked me over. "Your hair," he pointed out.

"I'm working on it." I dropped the satchel on the ground and sat beside it. Oliver joined me as I wrapped my braids around my head like a crown.

"So..." He looked down, picking at the long grass in front of him. "You and Hunter...you're..."

I dropped my eyes. "I think so," I said, not sure I could truly claim that Hunter and I were *anything*, while also wondering if I'd been mistaken in my assertion that Oliver saw me only as a friend.

He nodded. "So then...why not ask him for help?"

I gave a sigh, continuing to weave the ends of my hair into the hair at my scalp. "You boys, you've grown up with me. You've sparred with me. You seem to respect my skill."

"Of course we do. Hard not to when you can beat most of us."

I smiled at his response. "Hunter hasn't, and he also sees me more as a girl than as a friend or a sparring partner."

Oliver rolled his eyes. "We know you're a girl."

"Still. I'm not sure he would understand my need to do this." I took a deep breath. "I couldn't risk him trying to stop me." I'd worked too hard for it. And though I wanted to believe that Hunter would have cheered me on, this plan of mine was too fragile to risk including an unknown element.

Oliver chewed on that for a bit, studying my face. “And what if he couldn’t understand?”

“I really hope I don’t have to find out.” From the way Hunter had been impressed with my fight against the fake knight, I thought it likely that he *would* understand. Still, there was that niggling doubt. And I hated that doubt, because I was starting to truly care for Hunter.

Oliver nodded, his expression serious as he stared at the ground for several moments. “Here,” he said suddenly as he dug on the ground. “Rub some dirt into your face.” He reached over and smeared some damp earth over my forehead, which startled a laugh out of me.

“I can do it,” I said, pushing his hands away.

“Rub it into your hands as well. Get it under your fingernails.”

The thought made me cringe. I was the cook for a member of a royal family, and as such, I kept my hands as clean as possible. It would be awful to have Her Highness find dirt in her food. I would hate it if anyone that I fed found dirt in their food, but I saw the wisdom of Oliver’s suggestion and did my best to dirty up any skin that was showing. Then I donned my hat and the two of us set off across the encampment until we found the swordplay arena. A line of competitors had already formed, and a small crowd had gathered.

I had expected there would be an organized sign up. Instead, the official simply went down the line, sizing up each competitor and then pointing to one of three different groups.

My hat was pulled low, concealing much of my face as he approached. I only peeked out when he was right in front of us. “You’ll be over there,” he said to Oliver, pointing to the middle group.

I drew myself up, ready to protest, but Oliver beat me to it.

“It’s just my brother who’s competing,” he said with a nod in my direction.

The man gave me a skeptical glance. “Hm. In that case, head over to that group.” He pointed toward the spot where the youngest of the competitors were gathered.

I gave a nod and went without a word. If I could avoid speaking altogether, that would be best. I’d practiced speaking like a boy, but I didn’t think I was very good at it.

Oliver walked with me for a bit. “You’ll do great, and I’ll be cheering for you.”

I tried to chuckle through the knot of nerves that was tightening my entire torso. “How will I know you’re cheering for me if you can’t say my name?”

“Your name is Emmett,” he said with a firm slap to my back and a mischievous jump of his eyebrows. “Everyone knows that.” He gave a final wink and departed through the crowd as I took the final steps to join the crew of young competitors.

Oliver had been right. All the other competitors in my group looked to be between eleven and fifteen. As I sized them up, I surmised that I could beat at least half of them with ease. The others were more difficult to guess at their skill level, but I would find out soon enough.

My group competed first. We donned pads and helmets (which took some fancy maneuvering on my part to avoid showing my hair) and then we were each equipped with swords.

Wooden swords.

My heart sank. I hadn’t come here to compete with a wooden sword. I’d done all this work so that I could truly test my skills with a *blade*. That’s what they used in this competition. I had watched two years ago, and I remembered well the sounds of metal clashing, the intensity of watching as men swung lethal weapons at one another.

As the official swung himself up onto the judges’ wooden platform, I put all my attention on him, determined to understand what had gone wrong and why I now found a wooden sword in my hand. As he rehearsed the rules and the format of the competition, everything became clear. It was only this

younger group that would compete with practice swords. We were too young and untested to be trusted with real blades. I was devastated, but the saving grace was that the one competitor from our group who was victorious would then go on to compete in the higher level of competition—with a real blade.

My shoulders pulled back. Very well. I would prove myself with a wooden sword first, and then I would get my chance.

I gripped my sword, acquainting myself with the weight of it, and did my best to turn my face to stone.

There were eight of us. We were put into pairs and situated in the arena all at once. Obviously this was not the spectacle that most wanted to see, so they were eager to finish it early. I squared off against my opponent, a boy several inches taller than me, but lanky and awkward. There was a judge set to watch each pairing. The first of each pairing to get three hits on their partner would move on.

The horn sounded and I went to work. It was clear my opponent would be easily beaten, but I didn't wish to draw attention to myself by dispatching him too quickly. So I matched him stroke for stroke, never allowing him to get a hit. He became frustrated and swung down toward my head, but I caught his hand and sliced across the padding of his stomach.

One hit.

We crossed swords several more times before I dodged left, sending him stumbling past me and slicing across the back of his calf.

Two hits.

One of the other pairings had already finished their match. I parried my partner until yet another pairing had a declared winner, and then I disarmed my partner before thrusting the tip of my sword into the padding over his heart.

I was declared the victor, and shortly after, the final pairing had finished their bout.

We were down to four.

My next opponent took more concentration and I didn't hold back much. I hit his arm, then his upper thigh. He hit my hip, and then I brought his sword to the ground, kicked it from his grasp and then sliced across his side.

I was winded, but there was no time to recover because I was immediately pitted against the boy who had won his fight soon after I'd won mine. He was broader than the others and looked more comfortable holding his sword. We each circled the other, sweat dripping from our brows due to exertion and the layers of padding we wore. When the horn sounded again, he gripped his sword with both hands and swung hard.

This boy presented a challenge. He had skill, but he also had strength, which he seemed determined to utilize. He was trying to overpower me with the force of his blows. It wasn't something I was used to and it allowed him to get the first hit.

A breath hissed through my teeth when his sword caught my forearm. I was grateful for the padding, but it would still leave a nasty bruise.

I immediately changed my tactic, opting for careful footwork (made a bit tricky by my too-large boots) and quick sword movements. I deflected and dodged his blow, then delivered two swift cuts to his lower legs before rolling away and gaining my feet again.

He seemed perplexed. I would guess that most opponents his age would be so overwhelmed by his brute strength that they would stumble back in avoidance. He was used to people pulling away from him. And that gave me an idea.

I parried two of his heavy blows and then when he swung a third time, I stepped in toward him. I

caught his forearm, turning my back to him so that I could shove my shoulder into his chest. Then I pulled his arm forward past my cheek, and heaved him over my shoulder so he landed on his back in front of me, the edge of my sword resting on his abdomen.

It was only then, with him wheezing on the ground, that I finally tuned in to all the noise around me. Oliver's shouts of "Yes, Emmett!" were clear. The cheering was tremendous, and overwhelming, and it felt incredible. So incredible that I had to remind myself that I was a *boy* and if I cried in this moment, I would ruin everything. This had only been the gate I had to walk through. Now it was time to enter the real competition.

A reprieve was granted me. This next level of competitors did not all fight at the same time, so I had some time to catch my breath. These men were young, but they had been entrusted with blades and looked eager to get on with the competition. The rules were slightly different. Three hits would still knock out your competition, but we were not allowed to stab. Only slash.

I noticed as I stood beside my competition that they hadn't paired me with the smallest of this group. My helmet was still in place to cover my hair, sweat beading down my neck, but the young man whom I would go up against had his helmet under his arm, his face aloof as he watched the pair in the arena cross swords.

He looked down at me and I looked away until I felt a small knock on the side of my helmet. "Isn't it hot in that thing?"

I batted his hand away but didn't speak or look at him.

He chuckled. "That's what I thought."

I ignored him. He would not ruin this experience for me. He could laugh now, but I wouldn't be as easy to defeat as he supposed.

As least I hoped I wouldn't be. My stomach twisted with doubt.

We were the fifth pairing to take to the arena. The match before us had gone on much longer than the others. The two had been evenly matched and had put on quite a show—up until one made the mistake of throwing up his forearm to block a blow. There was a good chance he'd broken a bone.

The thought made me slightly queasy as I stepped into the arena, surrounded by an audience who shouted either encouragement or insults. This was it. I was really doing this.

I gripped the hilt of my sword, preparing to turn and face my opponent. But as I appreciated the familiar weight of my own sword in my hand, something bumped into the back of my head, and before I knew it, my helmet had been torn from my head.

I was pushed to the ground, where I landed and rolled to my back, my sword raised, ready to defend.

But he wasn't attacking. My opponent was standing well out of reach with a grin on his face and my helmet in his hands.

The crowd went eerily silent for two heartbeats, then it roared to life. With laughter, and jeers, and cries of outrage.

"What's the meaning of this?" the official demanded as he stepped into the arena.

I shut my eyes, knowing it was over. Knowing that the blonde braids crowning my head would be a beacon, letting everyone know that they'd been fooled.

A rough hand seized my arm, and my eyes flew open as I was yanked to my feet. "How dare you make a mockery of this competition?" the official seethed in my ear.

"Mockery?" I said, finding my voice as my anger and indignation made me brave. "The only mockery is that you refuse to let *all* competitors participate."

"Brazen lass," he said, hauling me through the crowd. "You're lucky you didn't get yourself *killed*." He gave a final shove, officially casting me out of the competition. By the time I turned back in outrage, he had already been swallowed up by the crowd.

"I beat them!" I shouted anyway. "I beat them as sure as the sun rose this morning!"

But no one paid me any mind aside from looking at me with disdain or pity. I heaved an angry, mortified breath, my fury bubbling up with nowhere to go. I quickly undid the buckles that held the padding in place, all the while trying to make sense of how that boy could have known I was a girl when no one had suspected beforehand.

"Em," Oliver called, trotting up to me. "Are you all right?"

His concern should have been a comfort. Instead it was the spark that lit the fire of my outrage. "How did they know?" I didn't understand it. How could I make it that far and then have everything ruined? I lashed out, shoving his shoulder. "Did you tell them?"

The moment the question left my mouth, I wanted to take it back.

Oliver's expression closed off and his eyes went cold. "I didn't," he said, his voice burning with hurt and anger. "I didn't do anything but help you. *Every* step of the way. They knew you were a girl because you *look* like a girl." He threw the satchel on the ground at my feet. "And they aren't idiots." He put his hand over his mouth, turning away in frustration.

"Oliver, I'm so—"

He turned back and pointed a finger at me. "One of these days, you'll have to accept the help that others are willing to give, instead of acting like you can do it all yourself." He turned and walked off in a huff.

I let out a sigh. He was right to be angry. I'd blamed him for no good reason. Maybe no one looked closely enough when I was among the boys, but after I'd beaten them, the other competitors would have been curious, would have looked closer.

My anger had nothing to do with Oliver. It was for my failure. My spectacular, humiliating failure.

I turned my face away from the crowd, picked up my bag and walked away, my arms crossed tightly over my chest.

The sight of Hunter catching up to me made my shoulders sink in relief. I turned toward him, fully prepared to bury my face in his chest and maybe even cry. But as he approached, he stopped too far away for me to reach him.

"I thought you said you didn't fight in only britches," he said.

I squinted at him. It seemed a strange thing to say in this moment. "I usually don't, but they didn't give me a choice." My voice was tight with indignation. *Pompous, worthless boys!* I started walking again. If he wasn't going to give me the comfort I so desperately craved, then I would need to walk off my anger. I wrapped my indignation around me in an attempt to shove my hurt aside. I just wanted to get out of here, away from the challenge I wouldn't be able to finish, away from all the judging eyes.

"Those men aren't like that blundering knight that you bested," Hunter said as he kept pace beside me.

"Oh, I know that," I said, dropping the satchel behind a tent. "Those men would have actually presented a challenge." I dug through the contents of the bag, pulling out my skirt.

"Emeline, will you please stop and talk to me for a minute?" Hunter asked.

The sharpness of his tone made me stop and look at him. He looked angry, but instead of being angry alongside me like I would have expected, he seemed to be angry *at* me. I pulled back a little. "What?" I asked, feeling immediately defensive. Why was he mad at me? Why wasn't he indignant on

my behalf? Why wasn't he comforting me? I wanted a hug, not a lecture.

"Why were you in that competition?"

I gaped a little, baffled by the question. "Because I wanted to compete," I said simply. "This would have been my opportunity to really try all of my skills, to prove that while I may not be the best, I can hold my own," I insisted as I stepped into my skirt. "And that *bully* had to go and ruin it!"

"Is that really the worst thing in the world?" he asked softly.

I stared at him, wondering how he could not understand how much this meant to me.

"I'm trying to see this the way you do," he said. "But I'm confused. I had no idea you wanted to be a part of a festival spectacle."

"You know what training means to me." *Didn't he?*

"This isn't the same as sparring with Falstone and the boys," he said. "If you had competed and those men had come after you, there would have been no restraint."

"That's the point!" I argued.

Anger crunched his brow. "Are you trying to get yourself hurt?" he asked, his voice rising.

I shook my head, utterly confused. "How is this different from me fighting the fake knight?" I demanded. Hunter had been impressed by that. Or at least he'd *seemed* impressed by it.

"That man was a blundering fool. Those competitors"—he pointed back to the arena—"are ruthless. Would you really risk being maimed just to prove that you're good enough?"

I sucked in a pained breath as I reeled back, away from him.

The hurt that washed over me was a physical thing. I felt the implied insult, the lack of confidence he must have in me. Down in my lungs and aching in my heart, I felt it. Those men had real skill. I did not.

"You could have been hurt, Emeline," he said, reaching toward me.

I flinched away, my mouth pulled taut as I tried not to cry.

All this time, I'd believed he admired me for my skill. I thought he believed in my abilities and knew what I was capable of. All his comments about the way I fought, the way I carried a weapon and wore clothing I could fight in. I had thought it meant that he believed in me.

Instead, he had been humoring me. Patting the silly girl on the head and placating her about her odd little hobby.

I fell back a step, my energy sinking into the ground at my feet, leaving my limbs heavy and numb. Those first days he'd been here, he had called me capable. Fierce.

Had he meant any of it?

"Em," he said, reaching out, seeming to finally realize he'd hurt me.

But I just picked up my bag and turned away from him.

13

It was difficult to navigate through the festival when my vision was blurred with tears.

I was nearing the edge of the brightly colored tents when someone called my name.

“Emeline!” I heard it again.

I turned to see Nellie hurrying over to me, Miriam and Gretchen following slowly behind her.

“Where are you going?” she asked as she eyed my clothing.

I looked down at myself. “Oh.” I suppose it was a good thing that there were so many strange performers about. My odd combination of a men’s jacket over a skirt, with too-big boots on my feet, would have looked comical anywhere else.

“And where have you been?” Nellie asked.

I shook my head. “Never mind that. I need to get home. Tell the others I walked, will you?”

“Why?”

I smiled through the pain that clogged my throat. “It’s just been that kind of day. Perhaps I’ll explain later, all right?” I wanted to leave before Miriam and Gretchen got close enough to join the interrogation.

“All right,” she agreed reluctantly, her eyes filled with concern. “Be safe.”

A bark of a laugh burst from my mouth. “I always am.” I turned and walked away, leaving her to explain to the others why I was leaving the festivities before the day was done.

The road home was mostly shaded, and as the sun got lower in the sky, I pulled my cloak from the satchel and threw it over my shoulders.

The whole day kept running through my head over and over. The wonder and fluttering brought on by Hunter. The anxiety and anticipation leading up to the competition. The humiliation and anger. The hurt. My feet chewed up the miles as my mind chewed on the day.

My hurt must have hurried my steps, because I arrived at the border of Sutton land sooner than I thought possible. Then I followed the stream to my swimming spot and stripped down to my chemise, more than ready to rid myself of the dirt I’d rubbed into my hands, hair, face and neck.

I dove beneath the water and stayed under until my lungs burned. I surfaced, gasping a lungful of air before dunking myself beneath the water, over and over. Scrubbing at my hair and skin, I refused to cry, and ended up screaming instead.

When I felt clean enough, I crawled from the stream and lay in the grass, too emotionally spent to bother with anything else. The fact that I’d been discovered and dismissed in such a humiliating manner from the competition was a hard enough blow. But to have it compounded by Hunter’s condescension and complete lack of faith in my abilities brought me even lower. I had desperately needed a shoulder to cry on, and instead he’d given me a punch to the gut. Even though I’d been unsure that he would support my desire to compete, deep down, I’d believed he would. Instead he thought it was just a game to me—an immature lark or a desire to be part of a spectacle. Did he really believe I was so unskilled as to be *maimed* by a fair fight?

I cried, my tears soaking into the moss that acted as my pillow. Eventually, my wet chemise

combined with the breeze left me chilled. Instead of getting up, I reached out, stretching my fingers until I got hold of my bag. I hauled it close and pulled my red cloak from it, spreading it over me where I lay curled on the ground. My arm ached where an opponent's sword had hit me, and there was a scrape behind my ear from having my helmet torn from my head. There were other minor bruises, but they were easily ignored.

I didn't want to walk back to the nearly empty manor. I didn't want to confront the questions that would come from the other servants once they returned.

So I just lay, lamenting my aching limbs and my aching heart. I drifted off, waking as the sun was dropping below the horizon with a pain in my neck and a stiff back. I made quick work of donning my clothes, attiring myself in the proper women's clothing I was meant to wear.

The satchel filled with my disguise felt heavy and uncomfortable against my shoulder as I made my way through the long shadows of the wood.

When I arrived at the kitchen, I slipped quietly inside, grabbing some bread, meat and cheese that I had asked Beatrice to set out for the servants when they returned. Most of it was already gone, no doubt having been consumed by the returning staff members, but there was plenty to satisfy my weak appetite.

I climbed the stairs to the room I shared with Nellie and ate my meager meal in the dim glow of my candle before climbing into bed and wishing to forget the entire day.

I was up earlier than usual the next morning, the satchel of borrowed items once again weighing me down. My footsteps echoed on the stone stairs as I made my way out to the stables. The soft glow of the early dawn light did nothing to calm the nerves souring my stomach.

Even in the dim light, I recognized Hunter working out in the paddock. I stood there for several moments, allowing the long shadows to conceal me as I watched him, already missing what we might have had. When his back was turned, I slipped by without him noticing and entered the stables. I walked on silent feet across the dirt-packed floor, looking into each stall until I found Oliver spreading fresh straw on the ground. Then I took a deep breath to steady my resolve and knocked on the stall gate to make my presence known.

He glanced up, his face transforming immediately from curiosity to anger. Then he looked away. "I'm sorry." I forced the words out of my mouth, but they came out scratchy and strained.

Oliver stopped what he was doing, but he didn't look at me.

"You were right. You did nothing but help me, and I had no right to accuse you..." There was so much more I felt should be said, and yet the words wouldn't come. Instead I set the satchel down in the stall's opening.

Oliver's eyes went to it before finally lifting to look at my face. He looked hesitant and guarded, but he didn't say anything.

I swallowed hard, guilt and disappointment welling up as I realized he wasn't going to forgive me. "I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am," I said, then gave a weak smile and turned away.

"Emeline."

Oliver's voice halted my steps and I turned back.

He gave a heavy sigh and then nodded. "I'll see you at practice."

Relief washed through me and I smiled, knowing that was his way of accepting my apology. Then I frowned as I admitted, "I don't think I'll be at practice. Take a swing at the others for me."

His questioning gaze asked for clarification, but I didn't give it. I just scrounged up one last pained smile and walked away, the odd sensation of my chemise fabric hitting my legs reminding me that I

hadn't bothered putting on britches this morning.

As I crossed the yard, my mind churned over my encounter with Oliver and I was so distracted that I didn't notice Hunter's approach until he was right beside me, taking hold of my arm.

When I looked up and realized it was him, I pulled my arm away and he let me. As he searched my face, I did my best to keep my expression passive. Part of me wanted to glower at him, but there were too many other conflicting emotions running through me that I didn't want to commit to any one right now.

I noted the concern on his face, perhaps even some shame. But I only waited. He'd stopped me. It was his job to start a conversation.

Finally he pressed his lips tight and sighed through his nose. "You walked home yesterday?"
I didn't answer. It wasn't necessary.

"I didn't see you when I returned, and I was worried." He did look worried.

But, once again, such a statement required no answer from me.

"I'm happy to see you," he said with a tentative smile. When I didn't give a reciprocal smile, he seemed to deflate. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"No, I'm not," I answered. "I was humiliated in front of an entire crowd of people. I insulted the one friend who was there to support me, who had done everything in his power to help me get to that point."

With each item I listed off, Hunter's face grew more and more concerned.

"And then," I continued, "instead of offering me even so much as a conciliatory smile, you reprimanded me for what I'd done and insulted my abilities."

His face went slack and pale.

"You didn't even ask if I was all right." I turned away, sniffing as I rubbed at my mouth. I swallowed and turned back. "So, if you'll pardon me, I have work to do." I stepped around him, wrapping a hand around my middle that ached from the emotional blows I'd been dealt.

I pushed through the kitchen door and shut it too forcefully. Snatching my apron from the hook behind the door, I tied it around my waist and stepped up to the stove.

Back to the kitchen. Where I belonged.

When Nellie entered the kitchen, she looked at me with wary eyes as I nearly tore the kitchen apart in my preparations. She allowed me my space for a while before finally pausing in her work and fixing me with a look. "Oliver told us what you did yesterday."

"Well," I said with a bitter laugh. "At least I will not have to be the one to recount my spectacular failure."

"I wouldn't call it a failure," she said quietly enough that I barely heard her.

"What would you call it then?"

She raised a shoulder. "The way things are."

Her calm but blunt reply left me speechless, and she went off to prepare the dining room for the family before I could form a reply.

I slumped into a chair, frustrated by how right she was.

"Are you all right?" Miriam asked. She was by the fire, tending the pot of porridge.

"Just frustrated," I hedged, already exhausted by the conversation and unwilling to delve deeper.

"I thought what you did was brave."

"Thank you," I muttered into my lap, then my lips pinched and my brow furrowed. "I just hate that they'll never think that."

"Who?"

"The competitors. The—men," I admitted. "And I hate that I care what they think, but how can I not? I've worked for this for a long time, and I can't know if I've succeeded unless those fools are willing to let me prove myself," I ranted as I jabbed my finger in the general direction of the festival grounds.

"So, it's them you're mad at?"

"I don't know who I'm mad at." I stood and started pulling out dishes.

"I heard what happened with my brother," Miriam said.

I looked away, swallowing down my hurt. "Did you now?" I said, not wanting to talk about it.

"I think...he was just worried for you."

I turned my eyes on her, which may very well have been blazing at her suggestion.

My glare didn't seem to faze her. "He just wants to protect you."

"I don't need protection."

"I know," she stated simply.

I turned back to my work. "Thank you."

"But is having someone look out for you all that bad?"

I thought back to the times I'd been comforted by the idea of Hunter watching over me. Was that all he was doing?

"For what it's worth," Miriam continued, "I think you're brilliant."

I took a deep breath, trying to accept the compliment, trying not to take my anger at Hunter out on Miriam. "I'm sorry we've not been able to train much," I said, realizing I'd neglected to fulfill the promise I'd made her. "But I really don't know if I'm the one—"

"Actually," she interrupted. "I wanted to speak with you about that."

I stopped working and gave her my full attention, hearing the nerves in her voice.

She bit her lip. "You see, when I was at the festival, I watched the archers."

"Yes?" I prompted, not sure what that had to do with anything.

"Do you know anything about archery?" she asked, her eyes hopeful.

It took me a moment, but then I laughed, my anger with Hunter finally dissipating in light of this girl's need for adventure. "You've grown tired of the sword so quickly?"

"No. It's just...when I was watching them...I just really want to learn," she finished, her eyes desperately hopeful.

I chuckled again. "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you there. I have no skill at all with the bow." I thought for a moment, running through the skillsets of all the servants who worked the estate. "Really, the only person I can think that would be proficient is Mr. Lockley, the gamekeeper."

Her shoulders fell. "I've never met him."

"He keeps to himself," I admitted. "He and his family have their own cottage like Falstone and Pryce, so they don't eat in the kitchen here. Sorry I'm not more help."

"It's fine," she said, turning back to the vegetables in front of her, disappointment evident in her eyes. "It was a silly notion anyway."

I put a hand to her arm, pulling her attention back to me. "No, it's not." I hated the idea that this girl would give up on something she wanted to learn before she'd even had a chance. She deserved a chance. She deserved to have someone believe in her—truly believe in her, the way Falstone had believed in me. The way I had *thought* Hunter believed in me.

We fell silent again, each occupied with our own task, and I realized as I sorted through vegetables that under my hurt and shattered confidence, I was angry. Somehow, Hunter's words felt like the

worst sort of betrayal. A lie revealed.

And then Hunter walked in.

He caught my eye, but I only let him hold my gaze for a moment before I turned my back on him.

"Em?" he said from behind me.

I didn't respond.

"I'm sorry, Em. Will you let me explain?"

I wasn't ready to hear him out. I didn't want him to explain to me how he wanted to protect me because I was small—fragile. I couldn't handle it right now. "If you need to talk to someone, talk to your sister," I advised.

I pulled carrots from the basket beside the counter and put them on the chopping block. Hunter just stood across from me as I picked up a knife and started cutting them up.

"I was an idiot," he said despite my warning. "I messed up. I know how important your training is and how seriously you take it. I never should have diminished your accomplishments, but I just hate the idea of you being hurt."

His talk of being hurt made me aware of the slight ache in my wrist from the blow I'd received in the first round of fighting. I rubbed at it, which only served to draw his eye to the bruise there. His eyes widened and he looked up at me. "That was only a wooden sword. What might have happened if you'd gone up again—"

I flipped the knife position in my hand and stabbed it into the wood between where his hands rested and the vegetables lying half chopped. I'd been on the verge of accepting his apology, but his words had relit the fire of my fury, and I stared into his eyes, which held pure shock. "*Talk to your sister, Hunter.*"

He held my gaze, his chest lifting and falling rapidly, no doubt unclear on how to proceed from here. He'd never seen this side of me before.

I'd never seen this side of me before. But his insistence on bringing up the danger that he assumed I couldn't handle reminded me of the way he'd jumped into lecturing me after the competition instead of simply wrapping his arms around me like I needed. The irony of such a need wasn't lost on me. If I'd lost the competition fairly, I would have appreciated a pat on the back, but I wouldn't have craved comfort. However, having even the *chance* to prove myself stolen from me had been more devastating than a physical blow. As much as I wanted to be fierce and independent, my feelings were just as fragile as ever. And that was maddening.

"What have you been doing today, dear brother of mine?" Miriam asked, clearly trying to break the tension that now permeated the room.

"Trying to make amends."

I dropped my gaze, not wanting to hear his excuses.

"Laws. What ridiculous thing did you do this time?" Miriam asked, sounding exactly like a sister who knew for a fact that her brother truly was a fool.

"I'm..." He hesitated. "...still trying to figure that out."

My chopping became more aggressive.

"I was attempting to be honest about my concerns and let someone I care about know that their safety and wellbeing matters to me," he attempted by way of explanation.

"And how did that go?" Miriam asked.

"Not well, but I don't know how to fix it."

I looked up at the siblings, who were both looking at me. "Maybe it doesn't need to be fixed." I turned my back on them, going to the back of the kitchen for the express purpose of getting away from

Hunter and all he represented.

I heard the sigh that he heaved, then the shuffling of footsteps before the door opened and closed.

As soon as the door thudded shut, tears burned my eyes and I leaned my hands into the edge of the counter, hanging my head.

I'd been looked over and underestimated for most of my life. Yes, Marilee, Beatrice, Cecily and Falstone knew and trusted me, but nearly everyone else had to be convinced. I'd had to prove myself with each new person I encountered. I'd gotten used to it and learned to take it in stride.

Until Hunter. Because he had seen me, or so I'd thought. He had made it seem as if my competence and capabilities were obvious, a given. He hadn't required proof. And I'd come to count on that. His confidence in me had been a treasure.

Now I didn't know if he had meant any of it. And his doubts about my capability had me doubting those I trained with. If Hunter was convinced that my going up against other opponents was a genuine threat to my safety, then he must assume that the young men I trained with didn't pose any threat to me. Either because they lacked skill, or because they had all been going easy on me. There was an awful squeezing in my chest at that thought. The suspicion that my sparring partners might have been humoring me for years felt disgusting. It couldn't be true. Could it?

“What are you doing in here?” Falstone’s words pulled me from my pastry-induced reverie. Since I’d refused to pick up a sword after the competition, I’d been doing a lot more baking the past three days as I sought comfort in one of the things I loved.

“Baking, of course,” I answered, pushing my rolling pin across the dough and refusing to acknowledge that my absence from training the past two days was anything to speak of.

“You’re supposed to be training.”

“And yet, I’m not.”

Falstone’s large hand settled on the rolling pin, preventing further movement. “Tell me what’s going on, Emeline. Why is my most promising student not practicing?”

I scoffed and turned away, my flour-dusted hands resting on my hips as I curled my lips in and bit down.

“Emeline?”

I shook my head then turned to face him, clearing the emotion from my throat. “Have you only been humoring me?”

“Humoring you?” he asked, looking honestly puzzled.

“Hunter seems to think that you and the others go easy on me because of my size.”

Falstone’s eyes narrowed. “And what does Hunter know of my training?”

His question stalled my train of thought.

“You think I’ve been going easy on you?” he challenged.

“Have you?” I asked, my voice sounding pathetic.

“Why would I waste both my time and yours pretending to prepare you? Do you honestly think that I would give you the confidence to protect yourself and then send you out into the world uninformed and unprepared? This isn’t a game to me any more than it’s a game to you, Emeline.”

I couldn’t reply. I was too busy trying once again to reorient my thinking.

Falstone let out a sigh and pulled a chair over so that he could sink into it. “Oliver told me what happened at the festival. And from what he said, none of the boys you competed against knew you were a girl or cared about your size. All fought to win.”

“They were young!” I argued. “With wooden swords.”

"And you beat them all, and would have gone on to compete with the rest if you hadn't been found out," he said with utter calm.

"They tossed me out."

"Not because you lacked skill, but because you had it. You earned that spot. And when they realized a young woman had earned it, and that she might be able to best them..." He let that sink in for a moment. "They threw you out because you were a threat."

I scoffed. "I'm not a threat to anyone."

"Try telling that to all of the boys out there." He nodded toward the yard where I knew the others were training.

I stared toward the window.

"Emeline."

I looked at him.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

I shook my head.

"Then please don't do me the disservice of accusing me of lying to you now."

My heart broke a little as guilt crept in.

"You're as good as I've always told you you are. You're not perfect. You have things to work on. Which is why you should be out there training."

My chin dropped to my chest and I closed my eyes. I knew he was right. I'd let the events of the festival and Hunter's words distort my reality. I should have sucked down my emotions and gone out to train with Falstone right then, but I couldn't. I swiped at the tears threatening to wet my cheeks and turned back to the counter. "I have to finish these," I said, taking up my rolling pin again.

"Tomorrow then?" Falstone's question was insistent.

I nodded and got back to work.

When the others started filtering in for lunch, I stayed in the back of the kitchen, letting Miriam take charge of ensuring that all the staff were fed. I could feel it when Hunter came in, just like I felt it every time he was near. He hadn't tried to speak to me since his first attempt at an apology, probably because I never gave him the chance. I kept as much distance between us as I could manage and never allowed myself to catch his eye.

So I wasn't prepared when he stayed behind after lunch. "Emeline."

It wasn't until he spoke my name that I looked up from my back corner long enough to realize that everyone else had gone. Only Miriam remained, scrubbing the table where the staff had eaten.

My mouth tensed, but I looked at him with all politeness and asked, "Did you need something?"

His already furrowed brow creased even further. "The others," he said, nodding over his shoulder. "They said you haven't been practicing, and—"

"Don't worry about me, Hunter. I can look after myself." I gave him a stiff smile and turned back to my work.

He stood there only a moment longer before leaving.

"Was that really necessary?" Miriam's question was out of her mouth as soon as the door had shut behind her brother.

I turned to face her, and her eyes were blazing in a way that matched her hair. "Was what necessary?" I had been polite, which was a vast improvement over our last conversation.

Her eyes snapped. "He cares about you and you're punishing him. I understand he hurt you, but how long before you let him back into your good graces?"

I bristled at the accusation but took a moment to breathe, realizing that she had a right to defend her

brother, even if I didn't agree with it. "I'm not trying to punish him. I'm trying to protect myself," I explained, hoping she could see it from my perspective. "And there are many ways to get into my good graces. But calling me weak and inept isn't one of them."

"He didn't do that."

"You weren't there," I argued, my voice rising just a little, indignant that she would try to tell me what he had done when she hadn't been around to see or hear it.

Admittedly, he hadn't said those words, but his meaning had been clear as water.

14

Hunter made several attempts to engage me in conversation over the next week. I did my utmost to be polite while making it clear that I didn't wish to converse. Eventually, he stopped trying.

I went back to training. Falstone had been right. There was no reason for me to allow the arrogance of competitors and Hunter's misplaced doubt to prevent me from pursuing something that had become so important to me.

Two weeks had passed since the festival when I found myself on the veranda, teacup in hand, as Princess Marilee and Cecily argued over the veracity of Miss Garnet's baby gender predictions.

"She was right about Seraphina," Marilee contested.

Cecily lifted her eyes to the heavens. "It is not difficult to be right half the time when there are only two options!"

"Beatrice," Marilee implored, "tell me you are a believer."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but that woman speaks stuff and nonsense."

"Ha!" Cecily crowed in triumph.

"Emeline." Marilee turned her pleading gaze on me, even going so far as to reach out a hand in supplication. "What about you? Has Miss Garnet ever predicted your future?"

"Well—" The words suddenly lodged in my throat as I recalled the prediction she had made about Hunter and me. I'd completely forgotten about it. She'd babbled on about something hunting us, which was nonsense, but what she'd said afterwards—that it would tear us apart—"Yes," I said in answer to Her Highness's question, feeling a bit numb. "Yes, I suppose one of her predictions for me did come true."

"See?" she said, turning back to Cecily with renewed vigor.

They continued their debate, Aunt Beatrice sometimes chiming in with her practical wisdom, but it was mostly Marilee and Cecily becoming more and more animated and laughing more and more freely at each others' proclamations.

I sat back and watched, the memory of Miss Garnet's dramatic prediction running through my head on a loop. I'd thought nothing of it. The idea of Hunter and me being torn apart had just seemed so ridiculous at the time. But in the end, our budding relationship hadn't been strong enough to hold up. We hadn't needed anything to hunt us; we'd torn ourselves apart.

Several days later, Seraphina ran into the kitchen just before lunch, scrambling up onto a stool across from me and planting her chin in her upturned palms.

"Hello, Miss Seraphina. What can I do for you today?"

She gave me a huge smile but didn't say anything. I could hear the *thump thump thump* of her little heels hitting the rung of her stool as she swung her legs.

"Seraphina?" Marilee called from beyond the door.

"She's in here!" I called back.

Marilee came through the door a minute later, placing her hands on her hips as she fixed her

daughter with a stern look. "When I said we may go on a picnic this afternoon, I did not mean this very minute."

"But I want to see the fairies," she said, her eyes all innocence.

"And we shall, but we must give Emeline time to prepare our basket, and we must be properly dressed for an outing with the fairies before we go." She held out a hand, and Seraphina was quick to jump down and join her mother.

"Can I dress like a fairy?"

"I'm certain we can find something the fairies will love," Marilee assured her, leading her toward the door. "Now, run upstairs, I must speak with Emeline about the proper fairy foods she must prepare."

Seraphina grinned and ran off.

I smiled at both Marilee and Seraphina's enthusiasm. "Did you have a special request, Highness?"

She sighed deeply as she sank onto a stool across from me. "As you heard," she began, "we will be going to visit the fairies this afternoon, and I was hoping that you might find Hunter for me and ask him to go check on the fairy house?" Her eyes were pleading. "I haven't been back in a couple weeks, and I would hate to discover that it is destroyed when Seraphina is with me."

I ignored the tightening in my gut and smiled. "Of course, Highness." As though I would ever tell her no. "I'd be happy to."

She smiled at me in a way that told me that she knew how much I didn't want to do this, but she wasn't going to let me off the hook. "Thank you, Emeline. I truly appreciate it."

My smile remained fixed in place as Marilee heaved herself to her feet and left the kitchen. Then I pressed my palms into the counter and hung my head. I had to go speak with Hunter. The princess of Dalthia had ordered me to talk to Hunter.

I blew out a breath. It shouldn't be this hard. I was a competent member of this staff, and speaking with fellow staff members was part of my job. I debated whether I should wait for him to come eat and ask him to stay behind or if I should go out to the stables and try to find him. In the end, I decided it would be better to seek him out. Get it over with.

I wiped my hands on my apron and drew myself up to my full diminutive height before leaving the kitchen. Normally I would have removed my apron, but this time I kept it on, wanting to communicate without words that this was a simple errand and not a desire for further conversation.

As I neared the stables, Oliver came out, giving me a polite smile and a nod. He seemed to have forgiven me, and though he took great pleasure in sparring with me (I believe in an effort to prove that he refused to go easy on me for any reason), he'd pulled back to a polite distance in our other interactions. Part of me mourned the loss of friendship. Another part of me wondered if Hunter had been right, if perhaps Oliver really had harbored deeper feelings for me. If so, then perhaps the way things had worked out was all for the best.

I returned Oliver's smile and entered the stables, my hands pressed to my quaking stomach as I sought Hunter.

He was in the second-to-last stall, brushing down Marilee's mare, Angel. He was speaking to her as he brushed, his hands moving over her in gentle strokes. It was clear he loved these animals, and for some reason that made my heart squeeze. So instead of getting his attention right away and executing my duty to speak with him, I just watched him for several long moments, admiring the way his tousled hair had to be flipped off of his forehead constantly.

I was so stuck in my admiration that he caught me staring at him. "Emeline," he said, turning toward me and taking a step closer.

I stepped back. "Marilee asked me to speak with you," I said, anxious to make that clear.

He stayed where he was, his hand flexing and relaxing on the brush he held as his gaze caressed my face. "And what can I do for Her Highness?"

"Princess Marilee and Seraphina are going to picnic with the fairies this afternoon," I said past the lump in my throat.

Hunter's brow jumped. "They are?"

I nodded.

He looked toward the door. "Soon?"

"Fairly soon, yes. I need to prepare a basket for them first, but Marilee hoped you would be able to go check on the fairy house first."

"Of course." He set down the brush and dusted off his hands as if he meant to go this very minute. "I would hate for it to be in less than top condition when they arrive. Thank you for"—he seemed to get stuck as he looked at me—"for bringing me the message."

"You're welcome." I backed away, fighting against the inclination to draw closer. "Good luck with your fairy duties."

One corner of his mouth curled up. "I'll do my best not to be eaten by wolves."

A laugh bubbled in my throat, but I stifled it and turned to walk away.

Later that afternoon, Marilee and Seraphina returned from their picnic and Seraphina gushed all about the new additions to the fairy house. I happily listened to her effusing about each detail until they left to change out of their fairy clothes. Then I grew melancholy, because though the gulf that now lay between Hunter and me was of my own making, I still missed so many things about him, and I wondered if that gulf was worth the effort of maintaining.

The cool water sliding down the side of my neck felt heavenly after my training session. I scooped up another handful of water from the rain barrel, splashing it across the back of my neck again before leaning against the side of the house. The boys had already returned to work. Falstone had gone back to his cottage to have breakfast with Cecily and Miles. And I was taking a moment to myself, the new maneuver Falstone had taught me running through my head.

"Do you suppose you'll ever forgive me?"

I didn't look up right away. The longing in Hunter's voice was bad enough. If I looked up and saw the same longing reflected in his eyes, it would be my undoing.

"I had decided to let it go, to let *you* go," he continued. "I wanted to respect your decision to stay away from me. But then when you came to the stables the other day—"

"Because Marilee asked me to," I insisted, finally looking his way.

"Yes. I know." His eyes were filled with that softness that I so feared. "But you seemed to still... feel more?" He took a tentative step forward. "Maybe I imagined it, but..."

I dropped my gaze. I couldn't deny it, but I wouldn't admit to anything either.

"So"—he took another tiny step toward me—"if there *is* still something between us, I just wanted to ask, will you ever forgive me?"

The temptation to say yes and throw myself back into the ease we had found before was nearly overwhelming, but I wasn't naive enough to believe that time and yearning had changed anything. I'm certain my frown was pronounced when I turned to him. "Do you even know what you did that hurt me?"

He heaved a defeated sigh. "I was terrified, Emeline. I had no idea you planned to enter that competition, and then I join the crowd and see you enter the arena alongside a man twice your size—"

"You recognized me?" I asked in shock.

"Of course I recognized you," he said as if I walked into that arena with my hair down and my skirt on. "And I'd seen enough of those competitions to know that no matter the skill level, accidents happen. Injuries happen."

"You didn't trust me to take care of myself?"

"I didn't trust the other competitors to play fair."

"And what you don't realize," I said, stepping up to him and putting a finger to his chest, "what you never bothered to ask, was whether or not *I* was prepared to deal with others not playing fair."

He blinked in surprise.

"Falstone is intelligent and a tremendous teacher. We've had sparring sessions where he fought dirty, no respect for the rules of engagement, no fair play. He prepared me for it!"

His face was scrunched up as he considered that for a moment. "Did he know you were going to compete?" he finally asked.

"No. No one but Oliver knew."

His eyes narrowed. "And why did Oliver know?"

"I needed boys' clothing."

His eyes blazed with jealousy, and that gave me an odd feeling of triumph and gratification.

Still, I didn't want him jumping to any ridiculous conclusions, so I went on. "And he thought it was a great lark. He never once expressed any doubt about whether I could compete, about whether I was worthy. He just wanted to *help* me."

"He's young."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked in frustration.

"He hasn't seen the things that I've seen."

"Because you're so old and experienced?"

"I don't want to fight, Emeline."

"But I do!" I insisted. "That's the point. I want to fight, and I want to know how to fight well. You see it as a silly hobby, while—"

"I never said that," he defended.

"But it's what you meant."

"No, it's not," he insisted, his voice rising. "I *know* you possess amazing talent and drive. What you do is impressive. It just scares me!"

His vehemence caught me off guard, but the genuine fear in his eyes was what really stopped me.

"In any fight," he continued, putting his hands out in front of him as if holding a bowl in each hand, "no matter the skill level, someone wins"—he elevated one hand—"and someone loses." He lowered the other hand. "In a real fight, with real blades, the loser—and maybe even the winner—would be hurt." He stared at me, letting his words sink in as his breaths puffed in and out. "Tell me how I am supposed to want that for you."

My shoulders dropped and I frowned.

He lifted his hands out to his sides, then let them fall back against his legs. "I know that might seem condescending or demeaning, but I swear that's not what this is. I just care. I care about your well-being."

"Part of my well-being is doing this," I said, needing that one thing to be understood.

"I know. And my head understands that, but it might take a while longer before my heart stops jumping into my chest every time someone comes at you with a sword."

Suddenly his concern didn't seem so insulting. Somehow it just seemed sweet. "I can understand

that.”

A breath of relief puffed passed his lips. “Good. Because I would very much like for that gorgeous little frame of yours to stay intact.”

“Saints,” I muttered, turning my face away to hide my blush. “I forgot what a flirt you are.”

“Only with you.”

I turned to look at him, certain I would see teasing in his eyes. There was none. And a little spot in the center of my chest became suddenly quite warm. “Why is that?”

His eyes softened as they caressed my face. “Do you really have to ask?” He took a step closer. “I care about you a great deal, Emeline,” he said, catching me in the snare of his gaze. “Which is why I would very much like to know if you can forgive me?”

A soft smile curved my mouth. “Yes.” I swallowed, willing myself to take the next step to mend our relationship. “And I’m sorry what I do scares you. And I’m sorry I didn’t confide in you about my plans to compete.”

“Thank you.” He grabbed my hand and pressed my palm to his lips, then squeezed it. “I need to return to work.”

I nodded and he gave me one more stunning smile before turning toward the stables.

I stood, stunned, with my hand still hanging in the air in front of me for several heartbeats before I unstuck my feet and went inside. I took a deep breath, grateful for the weight that had been lifted from my chest.

15

When he came in for dinner that evening, he gave me a tentative smile, which I returned. The next time he caught my eye, it was with a hopeful tilt of his brow that made my stomach flip. I really had missed this—him. We spent the entirety of the meal catching the other’s eye over and over. It became so ridiculously obvious that we couldn’t keep our eyes off each other that I was tempted to laugh multiple times.

“I think I may have preferred it when the two of you were fighting,” Miriam commented with a sardonic tilt of her head.

I dropped my eyes to the batter I was mixing. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“You could always just talk to each other.”

“I know.” And I did, but honestly...I was quite enjoying our little game. It reminded me of all the time we’d spent together and how easy and comfortable it had been.

Still, out of respect for Miriam, I did my utmost to focus on my work after that. In fact, I did such a good job that I didn’t notice Hunter’s approach. He reached around me and stuck his finger in the pudding I was making. I slapped his hand and glared over my shoulder at him. “Keep your hands out of my creations.”

“Don’t you need someone to test your food?” he asked before sticking his finger in his mouth.

“No, in fact, I don’t,” I said, feeling more sassy than usual after all our eye flirtations. “I don’t go into the stables telling you how to do your job, do I?”

He grinned. “No, but you could.” He stepped away and gave me a nervous lift of his shoulder. “You’re welcome anytime.”

The uncertainty of his invitation melted my heart, as did the wave he gave me as he left.

The door closing was followed immediately by an annoyed sigh coming from behind me. “That was painful.”

I turned to glare at Miriam. “He was just inviting me to take an interest in his work.”

She rolled her eyes. “He was flirting atrociously. You would think with how much he complained about those Wolfe brothers flirting with you that he’d do a better job himself.”

I turned to face her fully. “He complained about them flirting with me?”

“Of course,” she said as she stacked plates. “He doesn’t trust them at all, and he certainly doesn’t trust them around you.”

I shook my head. “I still can’t figure out why he finds them so suspicious. But I suppose it doesn’t matter. They’re gone.”

“Not necessarily.”

I paused in my work. “What do you mean? The festival is over.”

“Festival rats are nomads. They might have moved on, but they might have set down here for a few weeks as well.” She shrugged.

“That’s really what you called yourselves? Festival rats?”

She laughed. “It’s really not as insulting as it sounds.”

"If you say so."

Nellie came in and picked up the stack of plates, taking them out to the dining room.

"Do you think Marilee will appreciate the pudding?" I asked, holding out a spoonful of it to Miriam.

She took it, giving a sigh of appreciation when it hit her tongue. "I think *everyone* will appreciate it."

I thought a great deal about Hunter's invitation to visit him in the stables, but it took me a couple of days to work up the courage for it. I'd heard Oliver and Ansel planning to take a couple of the horses out for exercise, so I knew they'd be gone. I snuck into the dusty air of the warm stables and found a hay bale to sit on. I could see Hunter's head above one of the stalls as he mucked it out. He came out of the stall, still not seeing me, and used two large hooks to pick up a bale of hay and carry it into the stall, his shirtsleeves stretching around the bulk of his upper arms.

My involuntary sigh must have been audible, because he looked up at me. And grinned. I loved that grin.

"Come to ogle the help, have you?" he asked with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Oh hush," I said, looking down in embarrassment. "I'm just as much the help as you are."

"Yes, but at the moment, you just look like a knife-wielding maiden." He set the bale down inside the stall and then walked toward me. "You're not going to pull that knife on me, are you?"

I almost snorted. "Not unless you deserve it."

He jumped up onto the hay bale beside me. "I promise to be a gentleman," he said, bumping his shoulder into mine.

A jaunty whistling tune reached our ears and each of us turned to see Mr. Lockley walking by the open doors of the stables, on his way to the smokehouse. I was surprised when another man followed behind him. "Who is that?" I wondered aloud.

"You don't know?" Hunter asked. "Don't you know all the staff here?"

"Oh, of course," I said as the answer struck me. "That's Rowan. He's Mr. Lockley's son. He keeps to himself even more than his parents do," I said as the gamekeeper's whistling faded.

Hunter leaned forward to keep Rowan in sight for a bit longer. "I think that's the same young man who nearly won the archery competition," Hunter commented.

"That would make sense since he's grown up shooting alongside his father," I said.

His mouth curved in thought. "Perhaps he'd be able to teach Miri. She's gotten it into her head that she's going to learn the bow and arrow." He sounded doubtful.

I grinned. "She told me. And you're right. That's an excellent idea."

He shook his head. "I'm certain they have enough responsibilities as it is."

"Have you heard anything more about the poachers?" I asked.

He relaxed, leaning into the stall door behind us. "From what I heard, they caught one, handed him over to the magistrate, and all's been quiet since."

"You think that's the end of it?"

He shrugged. "There will always be poachers so long as people are hungry, but I think whoever was concentrating their efforts on Bridgefield land has given up."

"You know," I said, "there was a time that I thought perhaps you were the poacher."

He pulled his chin back in surprise. "Me? Why?"

"It was a fleeting thought, brought on momentarily by all your secretive fairy-house building in the woods. I didn't know what you were doing, and I'd just found out that the poaching started around the

time that you came here.” I shrugged. “I dismissed the idea almost as soon as it came into my head.”

He studied me with a mixture of humor and consternation. “I don’t know how I should feel about such a thing.”

“You were very secretive, sneaking through the woods, looking quite guilty when we ran into each other at the swimming hole.”

He turned to me with a faint smile. “I suppose it’s a good thing you did not know of my past earlier. That would have given you even more reason to doubt me.”

“I’m glad that you did tell me,” I told him. “It meant a lot to me that you would confide in me.”

He let out a sigh. “I’ve learned from experience that it’s best for me to be honest about such things.”

“You value honesty.” It wasn’t a question.

“I do.”

His blue eyes snagged mine and for a few moments I let myself sink into his gaze. How very strange to feel at ease with him staring at me in such a way, especially after I’d been so angry with him.

A piece of straw that was caught in the unruly waves of his brown hair distracted me. It stuck out just behind his ear, and I leaned closer, reaching to the back of his head to pull it out.

He leaned in too. But not to assist me in retrieving a stray piece of straw. No. He leaned in and pressed his lips to mine.

I stilled, stunned by the warmth that seemed to flow from my mouth to the rest of my body. I didn’t know what to do next. I’d never been kissed before. It was pleasant. More than pleasant, and I wanted it to continue, so I did my best to press my own lips to his in return even though nerves clawed at my stomach. He took that as encouragement and moved his body closer, placing a hand at my waist, moving his lips over mine with feather light brushes one moment and firm presses the next. My hand fisted into his hair, the piece of straw crackling against my fingers.

It was so very new and yet it felt inevitable, as if all our time together had simply been the product of our two souls hurtling toward one another, seeking to unite in this moment and in this way. Sweet kisses and the gentle brush of his fingers around my ear and down my arm.

He pulled back and I had to fight the urge to follow after him, to recapture that connection which had stitched my world together so that it made just a little more sense. I fluttered my eyes open and looked into the blue of his own as we sat, breathing the same air.

His grin peeked out, then he dipped his head to rest his forehead on my shoulder for the smallest moment as if embarrassed. I couldn’t help but smile as he pulled back to look at me once more. “I think I’ve wanted to do that since the morning I caught you staring at me while I chopped firewood.”

I blushed and shook my head. “I thought you were going to be a gentleman,” I teased in an attempt to tamp down my own giddy embarrassment.

“You’re the one who leaned in,” he said.

I held up the piece of straw. “To retrieve this from your hair.”

He blinked. “Oh.” A laugh sputtered from his mouth and color rose to his face. “In that case, I’ve never been so grateful to have a mop of hair that collects random objects.”

I reached up again, running my fingers through the unruly strands. “I didn’t even know you had such a mop until I saw you that afternoon.”

At my mention of our reunion, his eyes softened and his shoulders fell. “Saints, I was relieved to see you.” The confession seemed torn from his mouth, and there was something in his eyes that spoke of a deep-seated concern.

I tilted my head. “Why? Did you worry for me?”

“Of course,” he answered.

“But I was fine. I was always fine.”

His forehead creased. “Were you, though?”

My chin pulled back. “What do you mean?”

He let out a sigh, looking away. “What happened that night? After you helped us leave?”

“Nothing.” My denial was automatic. Whether I simply wanted to pretend it never happened or I was trying to protect him, I didn’t know.

His smile was sad as he turned to me. “Liar.”

It was my turn to look away. “Miriam said she wasn’t going to tell you.”

“Miriam knows? Ironic. I’ve purposefully not told her about it. I was afraid she would feel responsible.”

I shook my head, tempted to laugh at the way these siblings protected each other.

“I wish you’d told me about it,” he said, running the back of one finger along my arm in an attempt to get me to look at him, but I couldn’t.

“It’s not something I like to speak of.” My words were hoarse, testifying of the truth of my statement.

“She hurt you?”

My jaw worked back and forth, trying to keep my residual anger from that night in check, before I nodded. “Yes.”

“Because you helped us?” he prompted.

I shook my head.

“Then why?”

I finally turned to look at him. “Because she thought I’d been out meeting you.”

There was one moment of fat silence before he asked, “Meeting me?”

“You may remember Mrs. Braithwhite had very strict standards of conduct when it came to men and women.”

Horror washed over his face. “Em.” My name came off of his lips like a prayer, a plea for forgiveness.

Then he kissed me again, his lips trembling. “I’m so sorry, Em,” he whispered against my mouth before pressing his lips to mine again. “I’m sorry.”

I took his hand from where it had sunk into my hair and clasped it in my own as I pulled back. “Don’t be sorry.” I forced him to look at me. “I’m not. I’ve never been sorry for what I did. I’ve never regretted it.”

“She hurt you. Badly.” His ran his hand over the side of my face. “I heard Cecily speak of it when she and Falstone were in the stables.”

I let out an annoyed sigh. “Why were they even talking about it?”

“They were talking about you. Like two proud parents,” he added with a fleeting smile. “I couldn’t help but listen in, especially when I realized what had happened to you.”

I thought for a moment, trying to figure out how best to describe what that experience had meant in my life. “That day... I was so proud of what I’d done. I was so grateful that I’d been able to help you and Miriam. And then what happened with Braithwhite, it was”—I swallowed—“it was horrible,” I admitted. “I still hate thinking about it, but it was only a small portion of one day, and it meant that you and Miriam were safe. You were together and far away from her.”

He rested his head on my shoulder again. “You are too good.”

“And you’re sweet to care about something that happened so long ago,” I said, enjoying the way his

face nestled into the crook of my neck and the feel of his hand wrapping around my waist. I ran my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck for several moments and felt him sigh. “Cecily talks too much,” I said, feeling the need to break the tension that rested, thick, between us.

He chuckled and lifted his head. “She loves you.”

“I know, and I’m not surprised that she remembers that night nearly as vividly as I do. She’s the one who found me crying in the kitchen. In so many ways, she was like a mother to me. Did you know we almost lost her?”

His brow furrowed. “How? When?”

“She had run away from a marriage contract. That man found her here and insisted the contract be upheld. He had all the documents. The magistrate made her go with him.”

“That...” He couldn’t seem to find the words.

I nodded, still haunted by what could have happened to her. “Fortunately, Falstone wasn’t one to just accept fate.”

He ran a hand down my braid. “Fate is overrated.”

“Apparently, so is work.” The tension had thickened again and I was reaching for something to make it dissipate.

He lifted an eyebrow at me.

I tipped my head toward the straw bale he’d left sitting on the ground. “Aren’t you supposed to be spreading new straw for the occupant of that stall?”

He looked over at the work he’d abandoned and seemed surprised. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am.” He looked back at me, a bit sheepish. “And what about you? You don’t usually go so long without cooking something for someone.”

“Oh.” I really had forgotten. “You’re right. I have to get back.” I jumped down off the bale and turned to rush off, but he caught my arm, making me turn back as he squeezed my hand.

“I’ll see you at lunch?”

I squeezed his hand in return and then stepped away. “I’ll be the one with the ladle.”

His laughter rang behind me as I ran across the yard.

Nellie and Miriam were kind enough not to mention my sudden change in mood when I returned. Though I caught them giving each other looks, they didn’t comment on the dreamy smile that stuck to my mouth or the way I kept humming as I scrubbed the counters clean.

They were smart girls.

16

Two day later, Hunter came with me when I went to market. Miriam wasn't feeling well and he insisted she stay home and that he would help me with the shopping.

I didn't object in the least.

It was good for my soul to be walking along this road with the tall, leafy branches overhead. The fact that Hunter was at my side, holding my basket in one hand and my own hand in his other, didn't hurt either.

I was surprised to see that many of the peddlers and performers were still about. The festival had been over for a full week. But I suppose if they didn't have another festival to get to, it made sense for them to stay where they were.

Their presence made the market more raucous than usual. The trading was lively and the performers were quick to put on a show if they thought it would benefit their cause. It was all very congenial, and I was on the verge of commenting on the positive energy the outsiders had brought when Hunter's hand tightened around mine. I followed his gaze. There was a group of young men huddled together, pointing to the different stalls and talking.

Hunter maneuvered me around him so that he was between me and the group. I'm not even sure he did it consciously as he kept his eyes on them.

"Is something wrong?" I had to ask.

"I don't know yet."

I looked at the group again, trying to see what Hunter was seeing, but there didn't seem to be anything amiss. "Come on." I pulled him toward the next stall I needed to visit, but before we got there, those same young men jostled past us, laughing and tossing balls back and forth.

Hunter shook his head. "Jugglers."

He was right. The young men continued weaving in and out through the crowd, tossing brightly painted balls back and forth amongst themselves in an impressive display of skill. It was fun to watch, so I was further confused by Hunter's determined glower. "Are they really so bad?" I asked.

He sighed. "I suppose not."

"Your suspicions are going to make you miserable if you let them."

He scoffed and cut his eyes over to me. "This coming from the lass with the sword on her belt."

I gave him a sweet smile, which seemed to do the trick because his mouth curved into a smile and he bent to place a quick kiss on my mouth.

I looked away in giddy embarrassment and my gaze caught on one of the jugglers. He spun by a vendor's table, his hand darting out to snatch an item before tossing it to one of his friends.

My smile fell and I stopped in my tracks. "Did you see that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Curse it. They've stolen something." I hurried after them, reaching the vendor's stall just as the woman within realized what had happened.

"Hey!" she shouted. "They've—they've—" She gestured after them, not seeming to find the words,

and unable to go after them lest she leave the rest of her goods unattended.

"I saw it," I told her when I reached her. "I'll see what I can do." I hurried off, not knowing what I could do, especially alone. Then I remembered I wasn't alone and turned to see Hunter keeping pace with me. Of course he was.

He glanced down at me. "Do you have a plan?"

I shrugged. "Bluntness?"

He laughed. "I'll follow your lead."

We caught up with the jugglers, but they were still playing their game, spread out through the market. I watched the bright balls being lobbed over the heads of the villagers for several moments, until I saw the pouch fly through the air and land in the hands of the juggler off to our left. I ran right up to him and put a hand to his chest.

My abrupt touch caught him off guard and he looked down at me in surprise. Then his eyes raked over me and a grin started to curl his lips.

"Return the stolen goods," I demanded, in no mood to find out what sort of bumbling compliment or crass proposal he would come up with.

He looked further surprised, then there was a flash of anger before a smarmy grin curved his mouth and he pulled the pouch from his pocket. "Oh, you mean this?" He tossed it from hand to hand.

"Yes. That."

He studied me, then the pouch in his hand before giving a casual shrug. "It was only a bit of fun."

Hunter tipped his head toward the frantic saleswoman that could barely be seen through the crowd behind us. "She doesn't think so. And since you took it without permission, I doubt the constable will care whether or not you were having fun."

"Now, now," he cajoled. "We didn't mean any harm."

My eyes narrowed. "If it's fun you're looking for, I'm guessing the constables will have a bit of *fun* when they haul you off in shackles. Shall we find out?" I asked.

He continued to toss the pouch up into the air, over and over, catching it each time. But he remained silent until one of his cohorts stepped up beside him. He looked sidelong at his friend and his cheek ballooned out, as if he was pushing it out with his tongue. Then he fixed his gaze on me once again. "Are you certain you want to interfere with us?" he challenged. "We have creeds, you know? We protect our own." He took a slight step toward me.

My hand went to the hilt of my sword.

Hunter took a large step forward, putting himself half in front of me. The juggler was lean and taller, but Hunter was wider and more solid. "I know all about your creeds. I know how *flexible* they are." He leaned forward a bit more and the juggler started to squirm. "And in this village, we protect our own as well."

The man scoffed, making a little "hm" noise in the back of his mouth. He worked his jaw a bit before nodding. "Fair enough" was all he said before tossing the pouch in the air and backing away.

Hunter caught the pouch easily.

The juggler turned his attention to me and gave a wink before joining his friends and weaving back into the crowd, this time without the fanfare.

Hunter looked down at me, a slight smile on his lips. "Sorry you didn't get a chance to stab anyone."

I snorted. "I'm sure I'll forgive you someday."

He weighed the pouch in his hand. "Best get this back to its owner."

I linked my arm with his and we returned the way we'd come, arriving back at the stall of the

frantic woman in little time.

"Thank you!" she effused, clutching the returned item to her chest. "Thank you. Thank you."

We went our way and continued our shopping, but Hunter remained distracted. He held my basket but left me to do the negotiating as he kept his focus on the outsiders that mingled with the villagers.

"I forgot how arrogant they are," he said abruptly as we walked from one stall to another.

"Who?" I asked, even though I already knew.

"Festival rats." He finally pulled his eyes from the people around us and focused on me. "I mean, of course I remember. I was one of them. I put on the same airs. I was always tough, always right, never letting my guard down. But I suppose it's the changeableness I'd forgotten."

"Changeableness?"

He nodded. "The way that juggler slipped from threatening us to shrugging and giving the pouch back. It was strange to be reminded of how many times I'd switch from one tactic to another, always with such confidence. Few people know how to respond in the face of someone who is intimidating one moment and sweet as pie the next."

"Did you always hate it?" I had to wonder. "Or were there times you enjoyed it? I mean, I understand there is dishonesty." The cruel knight and these petty-thief jugglers made that obvious. "But the festivals are so much fun. Surely you experienced some of that."

"Of course," he admitted. "There were stolen moments of joy. Games with Miri and other children. There were kind strangers. But there were also rough hands pushing my face into the dirt. There was competition and hunger, and nights wondering if my father would bother returning."

I swallowed as the dim picture he painted filled my head. "Did you want him to come back?" I had to ask.

His face hung slack, like the subject was too heavy to allow the emotion of it to animate his face. "Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. That was the hardest part much of the time. Being desperate for the approval of a man I often hated." His feet were still moving along beside me, but his eyes were distant. They faced the crowd, but I knew he wasn't seeing anyone in the market.

My chin quivered as I fought to find words of comfort to offer. But they wouldn't form. So instead I stopped walking, tugging on his hand until he noticed and stopped his own feet. It took a moment for his eyes to clear and his attention to return fully to me. I tugged a little harder, drawing him closer.

He came, a soft smile barely glancing across his mouth as he raised a hand and rested his palm against the side of my neck, his thumb running across my jaw.

I smiled up at him, though my eyes felt a bit teary. "Thank you for being brave enough to go out on your own," I said. "If you hadn't, we never would have met. And I don't like to think what would have happened to you if you'd stayed."

"Me neither."

Someone bumped me from behind, knocking us out of our little reverie. Hunter gave me a smile, wrapped his arm around my back, and led us through the market.

Our walk home was slow and easy. Hunter shook off the shadow of his past and we spoke of simpler things. Favorite foods and keepsakes.

"I still have the bird you carved for me."

He shook his head. "I can't believe you kept it all these years."

"Aside from the cloak my mother left me, it's the thing I value most."

"Why?"

"Because it was given without any expectation of reciprocation. And because it was from you."

He stopped, his finger slipping beneath my chin and tilting my face up.

I smiled as his head descended and he placed a lingering kiss to my mouth. My chest filled with light and warmth—the feeling of comfort soothing deep aches and tender spots in my soul.

He pulled back and smiled down at me with light in his eyes. “You’ve given me far more than a little wooden carving. I’ll always love you for that.”

I blinked in surprise at his use of such a powerful word, but he kissed me once more and then took my hand before I could wonder if I needed to respond in kind.

I held my tongue. He clearly didn’t expect me to profess any kind of love in that moment. So I was more than happy to hold his words in my heart and cherish them until I could return them with full feeling and full confidence.

It had been three days since Hunter had first kissed me in the stables. Since then, there had been many others. Anytime Hunter and I found a moment alone, there was bound to be a kiss or two.

Three?

Four at the most.

This morning, after finishing his meal, he snuck up behind me where I was working in the back nook of the kitchen and pressed a quick kiss to the back of my neck. I whirled on him, giving him a glare and swiping at him with my spoon. He dodged easily then captured my spoon-wielding hand and pulled me close to him.

“You have to stop, Hunter,” I scolded in a whisper. “People are watching.” We were somewhat concealed in this back corner, but not completely.

“Nellie and Miriam don’t care.”

I rolled my eyes. “They’re not the only ones here, and Miriam *does* care because you are her brother.”

“Miriam will survive, and the others are leaving.”

I leaned to the side so that I could see around him and saw that, yes, the others were heading out the door. “Still,” I said, looking back at him, “there’s no need to flaunt it.”

He raised up his hands as if in surrender. “No flaunting. After all, I waited for the others to leave before doing this.” He kissed me then. And not in a small way. I was still holding a spoon in my right hand and my left was covered in oil, so I could not hold him in return. Instead I just savored the feeling of his hands slipping around my sides and pressing into my back while his mouth worked over mine.

There was something thrilling about surrendering control and letting him lead the kiss entirely. A little noise of contentment escaped my throat and Hunter’s lips smiled against my mouth.

“Don’t be smug,” I whispered, my lips still brushing against his.

“Me? Smug? Never.” He kissed me a little more before relinquishing his hold. “Stop distracting me, Little Red, or I’ll never get any work done.” He walked to the back door.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was just standing here stirring things.”

He gave me a wink before stepping outside.

I was loading up a basket of leftover dinner for Mr. Tennsworth when Beatrice hustled into the kitchen.

I gave her a smile and noted her oddly tight expression.

She looked over the contents of my basket. “You’re taking more than your usual load today.”

“Yes,” I answered as I wrapped a towel over the lid that covered the bowl of soup I had prepared, tying it tight so the lid would stay in place. “Johnny tells me Mr. Tennsworth has not been feeling

well.”

“Ah. And will Johnny be walking with you?”

I quirked my brow at her in question. “No. He was only here for an hour just after sunrise. He’s back at work now.”

“Hm.”

I didn’t bother asking Beatrice what her humming meant, knowing full well she’d tell me her thoughts soon enough.

“Will you take the footpath to Bridgefield?” she asked.

“Instead of the road?” I asked as I settled everything into my basket.

“Yes.”

“Not today. That takes longer.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit more fresh air.”

I looked at her, confused. “Except when I have a kitchen to run. This is not my day off. I’ll take the road and be back sooner.”

“Emeline,” she said, turning suddenly serious. “Please take the path?”

“Why?” I asked, utterly flummoxed by her insistence. “That would waste time for no good reason.”

She let out a sigh. It was the sigh she used when she knew I wouldn’t like what she was about to say next. “Pryce is still concerned about the peddlers you met on the road. They don’t sound like the kind of folks I want you to encounter when you’re on your own.”

I blinked several times. “You do realize they were kind enough to give me a ride?”

“I trust Pryce’s judgement,” she said with a stern lift of her brow, “and if he is concerned about the safety of the road, we’d do well to listen to him.”

“Auntie, don’t be ridiculous,” I said with a fair amount of exasperation. “I’ve walked that road every week by myself for the past several years. Just because there are strangers about does not mean I need to stay holed up in this house.”

“And I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to take the path,” she said with her hands on her hips.

“Cecily said that she’s spotted multiple peddler’s wagons over the past week. They are likely camped out in the forest nearby.”

“Then wouldn’t it stand to reason that the road is safer than wandering among the trees where they might be lurking?”

“Don’t act as though I am a suspicious ninny, Emeline.” There was hurt in her reprimand.

I sighed. “Shouldn’t you be just as concerned with me tramping through Bridgefield land on my own? Aren’t there poachers about? Is Pryce not concerned about that? How are the woods any safer than the road?”

“They caught the poachers—”

“Only one of them.”

“And there haven’t been any more incidents, not for weeks.”

Her dismissive tone made my frustration swell. “And that means they no longer exist?”

“Young lady,” she said in a voice so hard that it took me aback. “You will heed my warning. There is nothing here that can’t wait a few extra minutes so that you can ease an old woman’s mind and stay on the safety of the path.”

She’d worked herself into a panic over my safety, and there would be no reasoning with her. It was tempting to continue arguing, but Aunt Beatrice so seldom put her foot down that I decided it was best to concede. I sighed. “Very well,” I said as I pulled on my cloak. I picked up my basket and opened the back door. “I will be back soon.”

"Thank you, dear," she called after me as I shut the door.

I shook my head as I set out, my feet eating up the ground that led toward the woods. Then I looked up and saw how long the shadows were. It would be dark before long, and the path through the woods would be even darker. I hesitated. I had no wish to openly defy Aunt Beatrice, but I wasn't a child anymore. I had been walking the road between Sutton Manor and Bridgefield for years, and despite Pryce's strange prejudice toward the Wolfe brothers, I didn't need a nanny trailing after me every time I went outside.

The idea that I should follow a slight footpath through the woods in order to keep myself safe from a *road* was ludicrous.

But I'd promised Aunt Beatrice. So I huffed a sigh and took the path. The shadow of the trees made the woods cooler, so I was grateful for the comfort of my beautiful red cloak settling on my shoulders.

The walk was lovely as usual, and I looked forward to having a visit with Mr. Tennsworth. I moved quickly through the woods, over the stream and into the open yard behind Bridgefield. I gazed up at the impressive house. All signs of the fire that had damaged the new wing four years ago were gone, at least on the outside. I hadn't been inside Bridgefield since it had happened and was more than happy to keep it that way.

I passed by the house, winding my way toward Mr. Tennsworth's cottage. I stepped onto the path that led to Mr. Tennsworth's door, knocking briskly when I reached it.

"Who's there?" Mr. Tennsworth called. His voice was gruff. In fact, he sounded almost angry.

"It is only Emeline."

"Oh. Come in, dear."

I entered to find him sitting up at the edge of his bed, looking weak and agitated. "They've stolen from me, Emmie."

"Stolen from you?" I closed the door and set down my basket, hurrying over to keep him from trying to stand. "Whatever do you mean? Lie back down. You are not well, Mr. Tennsworth."

"I know I'm not well. That's why I was willing to try that remedy those fools offered me." He picked up a vial that sat beside his bed and was about to throw it across the room before I caught his arm.

"Let me look at that." I pried it from his fingers.

"Swindlers," he muttered.

I uncorked the vial, waving it beneath my nose. My eyes narrowed and I sniffed at it more closely. "This is only dandelion tea. Who gave this to you?"

"Some peddlers, or some sort," he grumbled.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. "Peddlers? Why were they here?"

He waved an agitated hand in the direction of the house. "Said Johnny had sent them. I figured if they knew Johnny, they must be all right. Said Johnny had told them I wasn't well and maybe they had something that might help."

"And they gave you this?"

"Offered it to me as a miracle remedy." He scoffed in disgust. "But I told them I didn't have any money to spare and they said it's no problem, they're happy to trade. And before I knew it, they had decided to take my Lina's pretty painted bowl as payment." His voice was rising, his hands fisted despite his weakened state. "I told them no. That little bowl was my Lina's favorite trinket. I said I wasn't willing to trade that, but they ignored me and left with it. Just took it! Right out of my house!" He yelled the last bit and then promptly sank back into the bed as the color drained from his face.

I stood there, heartsick and angry. "They took your Lina's painted bowl? In exchange for nothing but

a few swallows of dandelion tea?"

"Crafty, they are. Dishonest. It was her favorite." He pinched his eyes tight. "And now it's gone."

Indignation rose up and I went into action. I unpacked the basket I'd brought, setting all the food within his easy reach. "It's not gone forever. This was the Wolfe brothers, I presume?"

"Fitting name," he said as I helped him sit up against his pillow. "Those two are predators through and through."

"And how long ago did they leave?"

"A few minutes is all," he said, his agitation rising again. "I'm surprised you didn't pass them on the road."

"I want you to eat this." I settled the bowl of soup in his hands. "I need you to get well if we are going to make those thieves pay."

A faint smile crossed his lips. "We're going to make them pay, huh?"

"Yes, we are. But you need to get well if we're going to do it. Now, can you eat this while I go talk to Johnny? I want to see how much of their story is true."

"I'll be just fine," he said as he took a sip of soup. "You're an angel, you know that?"

"So I'm told," I said with a smile.

I kissed his forehead and grabbed the vial of dandelion tea, tucking it into my basket without him seeing, then left the cottage.

The air outside felt suddenly thick and oppressive as I stood just outside his door for several moments, fuming. I'd never known Mr. Tennsworth's wife, Lina. She'd died years before I'd come to Bridgefield to work. They'd never had children, so Mr. Tennsworth had taken on the role of father, uncle or grandfather to whatever wayward souls had come into his domain.

And the Wolfe brothers had stolen his wife's most prized possession. *His* most prized possession. Now I was going to get it back.

I stalked down the path. If I could find Johnny quickly, I could get the full story and perhaps enlist his help. I ran toward the house and thanked my lucky stars when I saw Gretchen working just outside the kitchen.

"Gretchen," I hollered, making her jump. "Where's Johnny?"

She was startled by my abrupt question, but lifted a finger to point behind me. I turned to see Johnny by the back garden and immediately ran across the wide expanse of lawn.

When he caught sight of me, he dropped the shovel he'd been using. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I didn't bother asking how he knew that something was wrong. Johnny had always been intuitive, and I had been running like the devil was after me. "Did you send the Wolfe brothers to Mr. Tennsworth?"

His chin pulled back. "I mentioned that he was ill, but that we were looking out for him. Then I sent them on their way."

"They didn't go on their way," I said, digging the vial out of my basket. "They gave him this 'miracle remedy' and stole his wife's bowl as 'payment.'"

Johnny's lips thinned and his eyes narrowed. He cursed under his breath. "I should have made sure they left, but I never imagined..."

"We have to go after them," I said, already heading in the direction of the road.

Johnny grabbed my arm. "Go after them?"

"Yes. I'm going to get it back."

He tilted his head, his eyes wide as if trying to decide if I was serious.

I was.

"Emeline, maybe we should let it be."

"No. I will *not* leave this be. It's my fault that the Wolfe brothers hoodwinked everyone," I said, pulling my arm free and walking again toward the road. "I trusted them first. I defended them." I had told Johnny about their spectacle and sent him to go see it, and he had sent them to Mr. Tennsworth.

"And how are you going to convince them to give it back? By asking nicely? You don't even have your sword!"

My hand went immediately to my belt. He was right. I had my knife, but I'd left my sword behind. I stood still for just a moment, then turned to face him. "Go get help," I said. "Go to Sutton Manor. Get my sword. Get Falstone or Hunter or whoever will come." I stepped away, but he pulled me back to face him.

"And what will you do?"

"I'm going to make sure we don't lose them," I said as I tied up my skirts. "They only left a few minutes ago. I know this land almost as well as I know Sutton's. I can cut through the woods and come out on the road. I can catch them." I hoped. "Now go!" I insisted as I ran off.

"Emeline," he called after me in frustration.

"Get Falstone!" I called over my shoulder.

I would find the Wolfe brothers. And if they didn't want me informing the village magistrate of their dishonesty, they would return Mr. Tennsworth's property. And if they didn't? Well, I had backup coming.

Mr. Tennsworth said they'd left barely before I got here, and I had to assume they were camped somewhere in Murrwood Forest. I stuffed the vial of dandelion tea into my pocket, dropped the basket, and took off at a run, winding my way through trees and toward the road.

I flew through the forest, the sides of my skirts fisted in my hands to keep my heels from catching on the fabric, my cloak flying out behind me.

Mr. Tennsworth had called me an angel.

Very well. I would be his avenging angel.

17

I crashed through the undergrowth, my anger driving me on as I considered just how fully those men had pulled me into their lying snare.

Bursting through the trees, I skidded to a halt on the road, looking both directions, hoping I wasn't too late. I was shocked to discover that the great hulking Wolfe wagon was sitting in the middle of the road in the direction of Bridgefield, instead of being farther along, heading toward the village. It sat unmoving with the setting sun blazing behind it. I didn't bother questioning my good luck. I just stalked toward them, my cloak billowing out behind me.

"It's wrong!" I heard a female voice cry.

My feet stopped, and it took me a moment to remember that the Wolfe brothers had a sister.

"Not this again," one of the brothers lamented. They must have all been standing at the back of the wagon since I couldn't see any of them yet.

I approached more carefully, more quietly.

"We had enough!" she argued. "We had plenty of coin to get us where we need to go, and more to spare. Why did you have to steal from that man?"

I blinked, startled. Apparently the Wolfe sister had a conscience.

"It was an opportunity, Elise. And we can't ignore opportunities when they come along. Now, get in the wagon!" His voice was nearly screaming and my step slowed even more. This voice did not belong to a man with reason.

"I don't want to do this anymore." There were tears in Elise's voice that pulled at my heart and gave me just enough courage to step around the side of the wagon so that I could see them—

Just in time to watch Daggon's hand lash out and slap his sister across the face. "I don't care what you want!" he screamed down at her where she sat crumpled on the ground. "I don't care—"

His voice cut off when Morley put a hand on his arm and then—to my horror—nodded his head toward me. My breath had shallowed and quickened, but I managed to hold my ground.

Daggon spun to look back at me and both brothers studied me with calculating eyes and expressions that seemed to morph from one mask to another. Daggon had a more difficult time putting away all his rage, so Morley stepped forward, his smile all charm, but his eyes still dangerous. "Out collecting flowers, are you?" he said as he took a menacing step my way.

My feet retreated a step without my permission.

"I saw some nice ones that way," he said, tilting his head in the direction of the woods that surrounded the road. "I suggest you run along and collect them before I decide to take a bite out of you."

My eyes darted back and forth, taking in the clenched fists at Daggon's side, the steely glint in Morley's eyes and the way that Elise still sat on the ground, refusing to look up.

My courage failed me. I took one step back...another. Then I turned and ran back into the woods until I was out of sight, my heart thrumming with fear, apprehension, and all my residual anger. Then I stopped, my chest heaving and my mind racing. I was a coward. How could I be such a coward?

After all the years of learning to defend myself. After all I'd done to find my voice and be heard, I had just run without saying a word.

I paced there among the trees for several moments, scared and guilty and angry.

The thought of returning to Sutton Manor, returning to Marilee—Marilee who had been locked away and tormented by her first husband—returning to Miriam who had been trapped in a life just like this girl's—was unthinkable. This wasn't just about recovering a prized possession. This was about the life of a girl. How could I stand by and allow the Wolfe sister to suffer that fate when there was a chance I could do something? How could I face Johnny and whoever he was rounding up at this moment? They were coming to help me and I'd just fled from the fight.

My hand wrapped around the hilt of the knife that was sheathed at my waist. I wished for my sword but still found comfort in the knife's presence and the idea that Johnny would be coming. He'd bring Falstone, maybe Hunter.

I closed my eyes, took one deep breath, and turned back the way I'd come.

Twigs snapped beneath my feet as I climbed the rise to meet the road and walked up to the two brothers, who were too busy manhandling their sister into the back of the wagon to notice my presence.

I rested my hand on the knife at my belt and planted my feet, trying to make my stance solid and my voice strong enough to be heard over the girl's objections. "You stole something from my friend."

All three siblings froze and turned to gape at me.

"I will be taking it back," I declared.

Daggon narrowed his eyes at me. "Run along, little girl."

"No!" I shouted. "How dare you come here, pretending to be decent, charming your way across the countryside, and then turn to petty thievery and manipulation!"

"Sure," Daggon said. "Go ahead and judge. Pretend as if you know what it's like to live the life we do. You who sits up in that posh manor, no worries about the next meal or the next storm that might come along and rip your livelihood apart." He gestured toward the wagon.

"So you prey on those weaker than you?" I flung at them. "A sick old man whose prized possession is the little painted bowl from his dead wife?"

"Don't worry, Red," Daggon said with a curl of his lip. "We steal from the wealthy more than we steal from the poor."

"They have more to spare, after all," Morley added with a snicker.

I lifted my chin. "Return my friend's possession," I demanded.

"Now you're just making a nuisance of yourself," Daggon said as he pushed Elise firmly into Morley's grasp before stalking toward me. "Do you need to be taught a lesson?"

He went to grab me, but I deflected his arm then pulled out my knife, swiping at his torso. If it had been a sword, he would have had a long gash across his chest, but my short knife only met air.

Daggon's brow hitched in surprise as he backed up a bit, then circled around me. "So the wee lass fancies herself a fighter, does she?"

The excitement that lit his eyes was terrifying, but I shored up my courage and reminded myself of all I'd learned.

Daggon lunged at me again, this time with more precision, but I was ready for him and was able to evade his grasp.

That is, until Morley grabbed me from behind, his arms banding around my middle, pinning my arms to my sides. "I told you she was a fighter," he said to his brother.

I cried out in frustration as Daggon wrestled the knife from my hold and Morley threw me up

against the side of the wagon, using one hand to trap my wrist against the wood slats while the other circled my throat, squeezing just enough to truly terrify me. Saints, what had I done? I had not expected this. I had not thought them capable of such brutality.

Morley shook his head at me. "You should have stayed lost when I gave you the chance, Red. You were lucky." He squeezed just a little harder for a moment, reminding me of my helplessness. "You only had reason to interact with the charming Wolfe brothers up to this point. Now...now you get to meet the real Wolfe brothers." The smile that curved his mouth was more terrifying than any glare he could have given me, like he reveled in the thought of unleashing the savage beast within. "Daggon, where's that knife she had?"

Daggon stepped forward as I clawed desperately at Morley's arms and kicked at his legs. But instead of just handing the knife to Morley, Daggon put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "No time for that now. We need to get moving. Elise has delayed us long enough."

Morley glared at me for a thick moment and then hauled me off my feet, maneuvering me toward the small door at the back of the wagon as I flailed. When he tried to stuff me through the door, I grabbed on to the frame, but he ripped my hands free. "Get us moving!" he shouted at Daggon, who quickly shut the door. Morley sat me on a narrow bench that likely served as a bunk for one of the siblings. His body pressed into me as he placed a knife to my throat and a hand over my mouth. My hands were trapped between his forearms and his chest. He pushed the weight of his body into mine, making my back ache where it pressed into the jutting edges of whatever lined the wall behind me. I pushed at him and tried to squirm out of his hold.

"Be silent!" he seethed at me, then turned his gaze toward the back of the wagon where his sister sat crouched in a corner. "If either of you causes me trouble, I'll put a knife in the other's belly."

Would he really? The madness in his eyes forced me to acknowledge him capable of anything. If my safety were the only thing he was threatening, I might have been brave enough to defy him, take my chances. But as I looked at the girl who crouched in the corner, terrified and defeated, I had to admit that I myself was defeated. At least for the moment.

He relinquished his hold on me just as the wagon jerked into motion. My heart went cold. What had I gotten myself into?

The interior of the wagon was dark and crowded. Tools, mugs, trinkets and clothing all hung on the walls, illuminated by a couple of lanterns swinging from the ceiling. Morley sat opposite me, his eyes fixed on my cloak.

After swallowing several times in order to get rid of the horrified lump in my throat, I managed to speak. "Where are you taking me?"

Morley's lip curled up into a snide little smile, and he held his hands out at his sides, my knife still clutched in one of his fists. "To wherever the beast may take us."

"Why take me? Why not just toss me out and be on your way?"

He gave a careless shrug. "I could do that. But I'm an opportunist." He let a self-satisfied grin curve his mouth. "And when a capable young lady ends up in my wagon, I can't help but imagine the price she might bring."

"A ransom?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said, giving me an assessing gaze. "Would anyone pay it?"

I grasped at the sliver of light he was presenting. "I work for Princess Marilee. She would pay," I blurted.

His eyes narrowed. I'd expected him to be happy to hear my assurance, but instead he spat a curse toward the ceiling. "Royalty? You work for blasted royalty?"

My heart sank further. I shouldn't have said anything. I had thought it would convince him not to hurt me, give him a reason to return me to my home. Instead, my desperate reaction had made things worse.

Elise spoke up from the dim back corner. "Royalty can pay. We'd be set up for years."

"Too risky." Morley spat. "A princess has resources. Guards. We'd be hunted the rest of our days. Is that what you want?" he snarled at his sister.

Elise looked away and fell silent. Morley scoffed. "No. We'll have to take her with us until we're far out of town." Morley seemed to be thinking out loud. "Then we'll find someone who might be willing to pay for a bite like her." His lips turned up in a cruel smile as my heart threatened to crush my insides. "Come on, Little Red." He stood and reached for me, but I dodged away, afraid of what he had planned for me.

He grabbed a hold of me, his grip so hard that it hurt. "I said, *come on!*" he hissed in my face. "You can spend the night in the belly of the beast."

The what? My mind screamed as I panicked and squirmed.

"Don't put her down there!"

My fear increased again at Elise's plea. She was afraid of what her brother planned for me, and that made my skin tingle with fear.

"Excuse me?" Morley asked, his voice dangerous.

Elise's face was terrified but determined. "She doesn't deserve that. She and I can both keep quiet, here in the wagon." Her throat convulsed as she swallowed. I couldn't imagine the life she must have lived with these brothers to have built up that kind of fear and fortitude.

"Now I know you're going soft," Morley sneered at her. "If you had any thoughts of keeping your family safe, you would know we can't risk her calling out to anyone we pass by. But no, you care more about strangers than your own brothers." He jerked me to my feet in the crowded space then leaned over, shoving an animal skin out of the way to reveal a few planks of wood that formed a trap door. He pulled it up and gestured grandly from me to the darkness below. "Your accommodations, miss."

It was so cold. Morley had taken my cloak before throwing me into the belly of the beast, grinning as he'd unlatched it and stripped it from my shoulders. "This'll fetch a nice price," he'd said.

The belly of the beast, as they'd called it, was barely tall enough for me to lie flat. I had to contort myself down into the space. Though it was as wide as the wagon itself, the boards sitting less than the height of my hand above my face felt crushing. I had to keep my eyes closed to pretend I had more space than I did. I lay there in the dank darkness with my eyes shut tight and did nothing but breathe. Sometimes I heard the Wolfe siblings' voices filtering down from above me. But I couldn't make out any of the words over the rattling of wheels that continually jarred my spine and head.

Eventually, after what might have been hours or days, the wagon stopped. I waited, trying not to get my hopes up, desperately wishing that there would at least be a few hours' reprieve before we moved on.

The wagon creaked and I heard someone's feet as they hit the ground. "Let's make camp," one of the brothers ordered in gruff tones.

I let myself relax just a little at those words. Now if only they would let me out of this hole for even a few moments, I might be able to assess my situation, get a hold of a weapon. Something.

But I remained in the hold of the wagon, listening as the Wolfe siblings set up camp.

It was fully dark in the hold until they lit their fire. Then a coin-sized hole lit up on the side of the

wagon. I scooted, bit by bit, until I'd lined my eye up with the hole.

I was able to watch as they prepared and ate their dinner. Daggon and Morley went about their work mechanically. No hurry. No fatigue. Just steady work.

Elise was curious to watch. She wasn't the performer I'd seen dancing amongst the crowd. Nor was she the cowed sister, threatened into silence. She appeared to be something else entirely. Her eyes darted about, seeming to take in everything. Her movements were quick and sure without drawing any attention.

Eventually I had to turn my neck so that I was looking up at the boards above me again. If I kept craning to put my eye to the hole, I would get a pain in my neck. Plus, facing up left my ear close to the hole so that I was able to hear.

They spoke seldom and only a word or two here and there to coordinate the dinner and the camp set-up. They sat to eat and fell quiet until Elise spoke up. "We should probably give something to the girl," she said.

Her suggestion left me a little stunned. I hadn't dared think they might actually feed me. Especially if they planned to get rid of me soon.

Daggon snorted in disgust. "You plan to give her your portion? Give up our meager meal to feed a girl who works in the kitchens of a rich house and probably eats all day long?"

Elise didn't speak again.

"That's what I thought." His tone was derisive almost as much as it was angry. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some business to conduct."

The remaining siblings didn't speak again and I fell into a sort of mind-numbing trance as I heard them finish their meal and put things away. Then there was nothing but the crackle of the fire. Perhaps I'd be lucky enough to fall asleep and escape reality for a while.

Instead, Daggon's voice came from a ways off. It was too far for me to hear the words, but it was once again jovial, and an unfamiliar voice answered in response.

I put my eye to the hole and watched as Daggon strolled into the ring of firelight with another man who wore the tunic and hat of a trader, the tunic stretched taut across his ample torso.

"Morley," Daggon greeted his brother with the charm and cheer I knew was feigned. "Fetch the young lady, won't you?"

Young lady? Me? Yes, please get me out!

Morley stood and crossed out of my sight. I shimmied myself closer to where I remembered the hatch being, my breaths becoming more labored and frantic. Now that I was presented with the possibility of leaving this hole, my body was desperate for the escape.

The wagon rocked a bit beneath me and I felt along the boards above me, trying to find the seams of the hatch, needing it to open. Needing the light and the air.

A lock clicked and the hatch opened directly over my chest. I scooted frantically down so that I could lift my head out of the hole, latching on to the hand that Morley offered and practically clawing my way up his arms as he pulled me from the belly of the beast.

I got my feet under me and fell onto a bench opposite Morley, hands clutching at my throat, which felt as if it didn't want to give up the panic even though I was now out of the confining space. I sucked in deep, desperate gasps, fighting against the shaking that wanted to take over my limbs.

Morley watched me as I fought to calm myself. "This all could have been avoided if you'd just left us alone." His neutral tone grated on my raw nerves.

I wanted to rip him to shreds—with my words or my hands or both. My hand even went to my belt, only to find the empty sheath. My throat ached to tell him that I saw what he and Daggon were doing

to his sister, and I wouldn't pretend it wasn't horrific. But I bit my tongue, refusing to make the mistake of tipping my hand. Let them think I was only worried about myself.

He tossed his head in the direction of the door. "Come along. There's someone who wishes to meet you. And if you don't want to spend another night in the hole," he added with a slow, menacing grin, "then I suggest you keep your mouth shut and cooperate."

He stood and reached for my arm, pulling me to my feet, then looked me over, head to toe, before untying the ribbons that held my skirt out of the way. "What decent girl goes around showing her knees anyway?"

If my face hadn't been scrunched in disgust, I would have rolled my eyes. "The kind that needs the freedom to kick a man in the head if the situation warrants it," I said through my teeth.

He chuckled. "You've got spirit, I'll give you that. Not that it will do you any good." He turned me away from him, and I tamped down all my natural instincts and didn't fight back when he put my wrists together behind me and held them there with one large hand. Then he walked us to the door, opened it, and put on a big smile for his customer.

My smile was nowhere to be seen, my face stoney. But I didn't start screaming. Not yet, at least. I looked around and realized that we were far from alone. There were many wagons in this clearing. I thought I caught sight of a tent that I'd seen at the fair and wondered if many of the festival performers traveled together. Would any of these other wandering souls care that I was being held? And sold? Even if they did care, would they be willing to stand up to the Wolfe brothers?

I turned my eyes back to the men directly in front of me.

"See," Daggon said with a proud sweep of his hand. "What did I tell you? Young. Strong. Hard worker. She'd make a fine wife."

My stomach heaved.

"I've got a wife," the man said, though I couldn't tell by his tone what impact that fact would have on his decision.

"A cook then," Daggon proclaimed without missing a beat. "She used to cook for a fancy lady. She'll feed you well."

"Cooked for a fancy lady? At her age?"

"She's been trained in the kitchen since she could walk."

The man seemed to consider. "Will she give me any trouble?"

Daggon laughed. "Just look at her. She's much too small for that."

"Well." The man approached, clearly interested. "Maybe..."

As soon as he was close enough, I picked up my knee and planted my foot into the soft roundness of his midsection.

Huh. Turns out the skirt didn't prevent *that* motion at all.

He stumbled back, his eyes bulging as he pressed his hands to his stomach, doubling over and gasping for air.

Morley pulled up on my hands, which were still in his grip behind my back. The strain forced me up on my toes. He shoved his face close to my ear. "You'll regret that," he hissed.

"No trouble?" the man wheezed. "Pawn her off on some other fool." He turned and stumbled away.

Daggon advanced toward me, cocking his fist back. I shrank into Morley, bracing for the blow, but Morley pulled me aside, putting himself between Daggon and me. "No need to scuff up the merchandise, Dag."

Daggon fumed like an angry bull but eventually dropped his hand. "Put her back in the hold." He spun and stalked away from the firelight.

Morley's grip on my arm tightened painfully and he dragged me back into the wagon. "Are you mad?" he spat at me as soon as we were inside. "Do you think your life will somehow be better if you force us to keep you?" He punctuated his question by reaching for the latch of the hole.

No, I didn't think it would be better. But if I had any chance of my friends tracking me down, I had to stay with the Wolfe brothers. My friends knew their faces, and more importantly, they knew their wagon. Such a distinctive conveyance was impossible to miss, would be remembered by anyone who saw it, and therefore would be much more easily tracked. If I allowed them to hand me off to anyone else, I feared I would be lost forever.

"Remember," he said as he pulled me toward the hatch. "We could always just leave you on the side of the road and let the real wolves take care of you."

I dug in my heels, trying to prolong the moment before the darkness would close over me again. "Don't put me in there," I asked, but was careful not to beg.

He fixed his gaze on me, his eyes holding only the tiniest bit of sympathy amid the cold steel. "You chose this. Now get in, because while I might not like the idea of hurting you, my brother doesn't have the same restraint."

On stiff legs, I stepped down into the hole and folded myself into the impossibly small space, chanting over and over in my head, *surely someone will come. Johnny knows where I went. Surely they can find me.*

18

It was harder the second time. Controlling my breath. Keeping my muscles relaxed. Keeping quiet. It was all so much harder. I ended up shaking and crying, and having to do so silently so I wouldn't reveal my weakness.

Without a weapon in my hand, I was inept, powerless, vulnerable.

Eventually the oppressive darkness sank into my bones and my crying could no longer be quieted. I heaved and sobbed, my hopelessness made all the worse by the way the sound filled the tiny space around me.

Someone pounded on the boards above my head. "Quiet!" one of the brothers shouted. "Before I shut your mouth myself."

Even with Daggon's sincere threat ringing in my ears, it was a fight to stop my sobs and quiet my breathing, but I forced my terror down.

Eventually, my methodical breathing and utter exhaustion allowed me to fall asleep.

I jerked awake when the hatch above me squealed open. I blinked as my hands reached out, trying to reorient myself. Morley's face appeared above me, his expression cold. "Shall we try this again?" he asked, reaching a hand toward me.

Though I hated reaching out to him for help, the horror of being in that hold forced me to latch on to any chance of escape. He pulled me from the pit and I collapsed onto one of the benches that sat against the wall, hoping against hope that they would let me be, even if just for a few moments.

"Come here, Elise," Morley demanded.

I looked up, surprised. Elise looked surprised as well. "Why?" she asked.

The look he pinned her with was frightening enough to prompt her to move without him speaking any further. She crawled forward, out of the back corner where she seemed to spend most of her time. The moment she was within his reach, Morley snatched her arm and then pointed down into the hold. "Get in."

"What?" she asked, her eyes flashing with fear as she tried to jerk out of his grasp. "No!"

Morley pulled her close enough that they were nose to nose. "I said. *Get. In.*"

Elise didn't argue, but she didn't move toward the hatch either.

"I have another customer waiting outside who wants to take a look at our little prize here," he said as he tilted his head in my direction. "And I can't have her acting out. So you're my assurance."

"Please don't," Elise pleaded.

Morley gave a careless shrug. "If Red cooperates, you'll only be down there for a few minutes." He suddenly turned to pin me with his fierce gaze. "Are you going to cooperate?"

As I sat slumped against the wall of the wagon, shaking and weak, it was all I could do to nod my head. I didn't have a choice. He knew it. I knew it. Elise knew it. I had to play along, or Elise would suffer for it.

"See?" Morley said in a pleasant tone. "It will work out just fine. Now, *get in,*" he hissed, the

fleeting moment of feigned decency gone.

Elise's face crumpled as tears filled her eyes, but she willingly allowed herself to be lowered into the belly of the wolf. A whimper floated up from the depths as Morley closed the hatch.

I was still shaking. Not only with cold, but with fear and anger.

Helplessness.

Morley straightened, arranged his face into an impressive version of a charming gentleman, and swept a hand toward the wagon door. "After you."

It was a massive effort to push my palms into the wooden bench beneath me and get to my feet. I stepped toward the door, but Morley stalled me. "Hold on there." He grabbed my hands and pulled them behind my back. "Just a little extra incentive," he said as he wound some sort of cord around my wrists.

I didn't know why he thought extra incentive was needed. My resignation was not feigned. I would allow myself to be sold in order to free Elise from that dark hold. Then I would worry about freeing myself.

Morley tightened the final knot, then fussed with my hair, pushing it behind my ears and running a hand down my braid. "There we are. Pretty as a trinket and ten times as valuable."

I didn't turn to look at him, just kept my bleary gaze fixed on the door. Morley reached around and pushed it open, then nudged my back. I ducked through the opening and descended the few wobbly stairs out into the dark night.

We circled to the front of the wagon where the fire burned. Daggon stood on the other side of the fire, conversing with a man who was facing away from us, but who stood tall and had the bearing of a soldier. My heart dropped. This was not the sort of man who I could easily slip away from.

We took two steps closer before Daggon gestured toward us and the man turned our way.

It was all I could do not to collapse in relief, and I could only hope that they would believe the tears in my eyes were caused by fear instead of elation.

Falstone was here. His face was stoic and unmoving as his gaze swept over me, assessing.

I choked down my emotions, digging deep to find my mettle. I would not ruin my chance of escape by falling apart right now. I had to play the role of a brow-beaten woman, resigned to whatever fate these men had in store for me.

"Like I told you," Daggon said as he directed Falstone around the fire to get a better look at me. "Young. Strong. Ready to comply. She'll be a hard worker."

Falstone stepped forward until he was right in front of me, then he lifted my chin with two fingers. "Is she injured?" he asked. "I have no time to wait for her to heal." His words were gruff and impatient—a man who knew how to bargain. But I also knew that he truly wanted to know. He needed to know if I was fit to fight.

"No, of course not," Morley assured him. "We keep our merchandise whole."

He pulled me a little farther away from the brothers under the pretense of getting a better look at me in the firelight. "Can you run?" he murmured.

"Yes, but I won't leave without their sister." The words surprised me nearly as much as they surprised him. I hadn't thought them all the way through until they were coming out of my mouth, but I knew they were true. If Falstone was here, then I was sure he had others with him. And if we had the numbers, there was no way I would walk away and let Elise continue to suffer under the thumb of her brothers.

I held Falstone's gaze as he determined what such a statement would mean for both of us. Then he gave a single nod before speaking up loud enough for the brothers to hear. "Will she give me any

trouble?"

I saw a self-satisfied grin come over Morley's face. "No," he said with confidence. "I imagine she knows her place. Shall we discuss price?" A greedy glint winked in his eyes.

"Yes," Falstone replied as he turned me so I faced the brothers and I felt a knife slice through my bonds. "Let's discuss it."

"Don't release her!" Morley shouted, immediately pulling a dagger from his boot that I hadn't realized was there.

My heart jumped, but then a handle pressed into my palm where it rested behind me. I closed my eyes as sweet relief washed through me. My sword was in my hand.

Falstone immediately drew his own sword and aimed it at the brothers, but Daggon had pulled out two knives and brandished one in each hand.

This would have been so much easier if they hadn't been armed. We would need to subdue both brothers before I could reach the wagon and get Elise out.

Two against two. It was a proper challenge.

Morley charged me, no doubt hoping for an easy win, but I pulled my arm from behind my back and raised my weapon, revealing it to the brothers for the first time. Morley paused and looked to his brother, but Falstone had already engaged Daggon, and I wasn't going to stand here and wait for Morley to attack. I stepped forward and aimed for his blade, hoping to disarm and subdue him.

He caught the edge of my sword with his dagger and used his significant strength to push me back. But this wasn't the same as our encounter on the road. I wasn't holding only a knife, and his brother would not be given the chance to grab me from behind. I went on the attack again, delivering hit after hit, forcing him to focus on defending instead of attacking. I caught his blade, pushing it up above our heads. Then I stepped forward enough to grab his wrist with my other hand and turned my back to him, pulling his arm over my shoulder and flipping him onto his back as I pulled the knife from his hand.

I knelt on his chest, my blade resting against his throat. We were both breathing heavily, but the sound of Hunter's voice broke through my concentration.

"Why didn't you just grab her and run?" Hunter demanded.

I looked up to see both Hunter and Johnny standing in the firelight, looking as though they'd just arrived. "You promised there wouldn't be a fight." His words were thrown at Falstone in anger, his fist clenching and unclenching where it held his ax.

"The brothers are holding someone else," Falstone answered with confidence.

Hunter turned his gaze to me. The sounds around me seemed muted for several heartbeats as I took in his expression. His jaw and mouth moved almost imperceptibly. Likely he wished to ask about my welfare but was doing his best to control himself. I nodded just a little, answering the unspoken question, and his shoulders sank in relief.

"What's the meaning of this?" Daggon shouted from where he cowered on the ground at the point of Falstone's sword.

I ignored him. "Johnny. Come hold him."

Johnny stepped closer, his staff in hand. I got to my feet and Johnny pressed his foot into Morley's stomach, placing the end of his staff at the hollow of Morley's throat.

"I have to get Elise out." I ran to the wagon, throwing the door open and scrambling inside. The two lanterns that swung from the ceiling made the light and shadows inside dance. I fell to my knees and was about to pull the animal skin aside when I heard Morley shout.

"Careful not to pull the wrong latch!" His taunt was loud and brash.

My hand hovered over the handle.

"What wrong latch?" I heard Hunter ask.

"The beast is a magical piece of machinery," Daggon said as if setting up a story. "That trap door has two latches. One will open it. The other floods the belly of the beast with sand. It's a terrible way to go. You're either smothered by the weight or you breathe in so much of it that your lungs stop working."

He could be lying, yet as I studied the trap door, I realized he was right about one thing. There were two handles. "Elise?" I called out.

"Get me out!" she begged from beneath the floorboards.

"Is the hold rigged?" I asked.

"No!" she insisted. "Just get me out!"

I reached again for the handle.

"Wait!"

I turned to see Hunter in the doorway. "Is there any chance the girl doesn't know everything?" he asked.

"Of course we haven't told Elise all the secrets of the beast," Daggon shouted from where he lay prostrate on the ground.

"He's lying!" Elise screamed from below, her voice cracked and desperate.

"Am I?" Daggon challenged. "Look at this creation. Look at the artistry, the cleverness. We've been at this game for *generations*. We know tricks and secrets you can't comprehend."

"You would risk us killing your sister?" Falstone's voice was heavy with anger.

"She's disloyal. It wouldn't be any more than she deserves for her ungratefulness."

Frustration washed over me. I wanted to yank the hatch open then and there, but I'd seen this contraption do too many impossible things. I couldn't discount the possibility that the hold was somehow rigged to cause further injury if I pulled the wrong handle.

I let out a cry of dismay and got to my feet, trying to think. The sight of my bright red cloak glinting in the lamplight with my knife sitting on top of it caught my attention. I grabbed the knife and sheathed it in my belt as I tried to think my way around the problem. Could there be another trap door? I couldn't imagine so in such a small space. Should I just pick a handle and hope for the best? Should I try to pry the hatch from its hinges with brute force?

Brute force might work, but not on the hatch. I turned to the door. "Move aside," I said to Hunter.

He stepped back immediately. Once I'd jumped down from the wagon, I pulled out my sword and held it out to Hunter. "Trade me," I insisted.

Hunter looked confused at first, but then he let me have his ax and took the sword in its place.

With the tool firmly in hand, I ignored Daggon and Morley, who were still being held by Johnny and Falstone, and circled the wagon until I reached the broad side that faced the fire.

"This is outrageous!" Daggon shouted. "Release us!" The overdone volume of his demand made me look toward the rest of the camp. I peered into the dark, the firelight illuminating only our direct vicinity. But as I focused on the night surrounding us, the brothers' dramatic shouts made sense. They wanted an audience, and they had drawn one. Several small clusters of people had left their own fires and wagons, drawn by the extraordinary scene unfolding around the Wolfe wagon.

I couldn't make out their faces, but I sensed the confusion and mistrust.

They didn't understand what was happening or whose side they should be on, so they watched and waited. We didn't have much time.

I knelt on the ground. "Elise?" I called, my hand resting down low against the side of the wagon.

"Can you move to the far side of where you are? Do you have enough room that you can get away from this side?" I thumped my fist twice on the wood.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then do it. I'm cutting you out."

I took the ax in both my hands, weighing it for several moments to give Elise time to move.

"Cover your face," I shouted at her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said, her voice even more muffled than before.

I tightened my grip.

"Don't you dare cut into our—"

Morley's voice cut off as the ax bit into the wood. This had to work.

"Stop! You're destroying it!"

I ignored the protests. Three strikes later, the wood started to splinter and break. Two more strikes and a chunk of wood fell free.

I paused, leaning down to peer into the belly of the beast, but I could only see darkness. "Elise? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she called. "Keep going."

I sighed in relief, then stood up and resumed my chopping, but my strength was waning and my swings were getting less and less effective.

"Here, let me."

I looked up to see Hunter holding his hand out. I happily gave the ax over to him and stepped back.

Hunter's chops were swifter and did a lot more damage. As the hole became bigger, I had to wonder if the rig would hold up under the onslaught, or might it collapse on Elise? *Saints, don't let her be crushed.*

Daggon and Morley continued to protest in the background and I even saw some of the other peddlers step forward, shouting for us to stop. But Hunter gave them no heed, hacking away until he gave one more almighty swing as he let out a grunt of exertion.

He tossed the ax aside with a dull thud and we both pushed forward, reaching into the gaping hole at the side of the beast. I felt Elise's hand latch on to mine and pulled her forward.

"Careful here," Hunter said, pointing out the splintered edges of wood that surrounded her escape. Elise seemed to ignore the danger, intent on getting out, and collapsed against me once her feet hit the ground.

"Are you all right?" I asked as I did my best to hold her up.

"Yes, thank you." Her voice shook along with her body, but she did her best to pull herself together and straighten.

"We have to go," I said to both her and the men who had come for me.

"You're not going anywhere," a booming voice shouted from the darkness. He was large and had the barrel chest of a blacksmith. "Not until you explain why you've come into our camp and attacked two of our own."

"We're taking these men to the constable," Falstone replied as he pulled Daggon to his feet, tying Daggon's hands behind his back.

"For what? Defending ourselves?" Daggon argued, looking uncomfortable and defiant all at the same time. "We've done nothing. You men came in here and tore apart my wagon without cause. Are we going to allow such abuse, my friends?" He shouted this to the scattered people around us.

"Silence," Falstone said, yanking Daggon away from the fire, toward where their horses waited.

"He's right!" the large man said, and behind him I could see more people stepping forward, ready

to take up the cause. "You've got no authority here."

Falstone practically growled in response. "That's why we're taking them to the authorities."

"Under what charge?" the man demanded, folding his arms over his broad chest.

At his show of bravado, several other men moved a bit closer.

I blinked in shock. Had they not seen the way we had to cut Elise out of the belly of the beast? Surely they must have seen.... I let go of Elise and stepped forward into the light. "They took me!" I yelled, desperate for the truth of their depravity to be known. "They stole from my friend and then took me from the road I was walking."

"She stowed away!" Daggan accused without missing a beat. "Got herself trapped in our hold. We didn't even know she was there."

"You tried to sell me to one of the men in this very camp!" I screamed in protest.

He just kept shouting his lies over my own words. "And now that they've destroyed our wagon—our life's work—they're making excuses."

"Liar!" I screamed.

"Who are you going to believe, friends?" he asked, putting on an even greater performance than the one I'd seen at the festival. "Some uppity group of strangers? Or one of your own?"

"My name is Porter Falstone, I am employed by Her Highness, Princess Marilee of Dalthia. She is married to Sir James, a respected member of this community. You have my word that these men will be dealt with justly."

Falstone's attempt at diplomacy fell on deaf ears.

The burly man, who apparently spoke for all the peddlers and performers who were camped here, just shook his head. "We don't belong to no village. No lawman looks out for us. We have to stand for each other. You folk need to be on your way and leave these men be. You've already smashed their wagon. Any damage they may have done to you and yours, you've repaid by the wreckage of their livelihood."

His declaration and the way that even more men and women came forward, standing behind him in solidarity, left us all speechless. Silence settled thick among us. Each group stared at the other, waiting for someone to move or to speak.

In those moments, movement behind the Wolfe wagon caught my eye. I watched as Elise slipped silently from the back of the wagon, shrouded in a cloak, a stuffed satchel hanging on her back. She looked around furtively and then slunk away into the shadows.

A tiny knot released in my gut. With the way things were going now, I didn't think we'd be allowed to bring the Wolfe brothers to the authorities. And there was no way they would allow us to take their sister from them. She was the pretty face that collected the money, after all. So it was more than gratifying to see that at least Elise Wolfe had found a way to leave her brothers behind.

"What's it going to be, gents?"

I turned back when the man spoke again for the group.

"We don't want trouble," he said. "We've got enough already. Go on now. Let those men go and leave us in peace." The man's eyes looked tired, and I wondered again about the life that these people led. I hated that his conviction and need to protect his own was going to rob us of justice—I knew it was inevitable—but I understood him, if only a little.

I felt Hunter's warmth at my back before he slid his arms around me.

Falstone still glared, but I could see that he, too, knew we had no choice. We were outnumbered, and though the truth was on our side, the law was not present to see justice done.

Johnny was the first to move. He withdrew his foot from Morley's chest and removed his staff from

where it rested against his throat.

The younger Wolfe brother rolled to his feet, straightening his clothing with aggressive strokes, then turned to pin Falstone with a death stare.

Falstone returned it in kind, his sword still trained at Daggon's throat, his other hand pulling up on Daggon's bound hands just enough to make him uncomfortable. Then he cut his eyes over to me. I gave the slightest of nods to let him know it was all right.

He still looked hesitant, but he finally let go and shoved Daggon away from him in disgust.

Morley stepped forward and untied his brother's hands as Daggon turned his venomous stare on me. His hands fell free and he rubbed at his wrists, then made an aggressive move toward Hunter and me. All four of us brought our weapons up, the moment tense. But then Morley touched his brother's arm, no doubt as a warning to keep his temper in check.

My hand twitched on the hilt of my sword.

Disdain curled Daggon's lip. "I should make you pay for every scratch you put on the beast," he snarled.

Hunter took an aggressive step forward, but I kept a staying hand on his arm. "And if ever I see you again," he said, his voice dangerous in a way I'd never heard it before, "I *will* make you pay for every mark you put on her."

Daggon had the gall to smile. "Then we understand one another" was all he said before walking away.

Johnny, Hunter and I all took a step toward the retreating brothers, but Falstone's call of "Come" made us halt. "We have who we came for. That will have to be enough."

He was right. It was all we could do.

Hunter leaned close to my ear. "What about Elise?"

"She left," I murmured as we each stowed our weapons. "And we'd best not draw attention to that fact."

He nodded and then nudged me toward the horses. I went, but I only made it a few steps before stopping. "Not without my things," I said, turning back toward the wagon. Daggon snarled and moved as though to intercept me but seemed to think better of it when Morley put a hand to his arm. I hopped into the wagon, quickly locating and retrieving Mr. Tennsworth's bowl and my scarlet cloak. When I climbed down from the wagon, Hunter was waiting for me. Daggon leaned casually against the side of the broken wagon, firelight glinting off his black eyes.

As I clutched my cloak and Mr. Tennsworth's bowl to my chest, I stood tall and defiant, returning his glare with one of my own. Then I walked away, knowing that despite my bravado, those eyes would haunt my dreams.

19

I hadn't had much opportunity to ride horses in my life, but after drinking deeply from the water skin that Falstone offered me, I climbed up behind Hunter without hesitation, eager for the animal to run us far away from here. I clung to Hunter's waist as he kicked the horse into an easy lope. My skirts flapped out behind me and I was grateful for the britches that hugged my legs.

I didn't recognize the rutted road that we followed away from the camp, but perhaps that was simply because it was dark. Either way, the three men took the opportunity to put several miles between ourselves and the camp before slowing to a more comfortable walk.

Falstone and Johnny drew up on either side of our horse.

"The girl escaped on her own?" Falstone asked.

I nodded.

"Still," Johnny said, staring straight ahead, his body coiled tight and his jaw set. "We shouldn't just let them go."

"We already did," Falstone pointed out. "But make no mistake, I'll be going to the authorities at first light."

Johnny turned to look at Falstone, as if assessing the truthfulness of what he'd just said, then he gave a firm nod and turned forward again. "Good."

For a moment, I worried that they would wish me to go, and the thought of tracking down a constable or magistrate and rehashing the night's events made me want to sob. "Do I have to go?" I asked, wanting nothing more than to sleep for a day straight then bury myself in food preparations.

"No," Falstone assured me. "I'm certain if the magistrate needs your testimony, he can be convinced to come to the manor."

"Good," I sighed, laying my head against Hunter's back.

Falstone and Johnny started discussing what sort of accusations and evidence would best convince the magistrate to act, their horses falling a bit behind ours so that they could converse more easily without us in the middle.

Hunter's hand covered mine where they rested against his stomach, squeezing my hands and running his fingers over my arms as if assuring himself that I was there. Finally he turned his head. "Are you all right?"

The way his voice shook made my heart ache for him, and for myself. "I'm...I will be," I said, desperate for my answer to be fully honest. "I'm not really hurt, I'm just trying to believe that it's over and done."

He squeezed my hand again and I pressed myself more firmly to his back, eager to soak in more of his warmth.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"We were lucky that they came to this camp. Since Johnny knew that you'd gone after them, it wasn't too difficult to track them down. But when we entered the camp, it was clear none of them trusted us, so Falstone simply asked if anyone knew where he could find a young girl." I heard him

swallow. "There was a man who snorted and said the brothers were offering a young girl for the right price, but warned us to be wary, that she was a handful. I nearly went mad when I heard it. I was ready to find them and tear them apart, but Falstone convinced me to let him handle it."

My mind raced with the possibilities of what might have happened if Hunter had torn into the brothers. "They would have recognized you."

"Yes. But luckily they didn't know Falstone, and he has a more level head than I do. It was all I could do to stay back in the shadows while he pretended to buy you. It reminded me of the way I'd nearly lost Miriam. I couldn't believe it nearly happened to you." His grip on my hand increased and he hugged it to his chest.

"I'm sorry I underestimated them."

He slowly shook his head. "I swear, I did not believe them capable of such things."

"Neither did I. I defended them," I said, an ache lodging in my throat. "Over and over, I defended them. To you. To Aunt Beatrice."

He let out a sigh. "When Johnny showed up looking for Falstone, I knew it was bad."

"I tried to handle it on my own. I confronted them there on the road; I demanded they give me Mr. Tennsworth's bowl. I thought it would be simple. It was only a bowl after all. But the way they treated Elise...it was so much worse than trickery. Still, I had to confront them. They overpowered me. I failed. Just like you worried I would."

"I never expected you to fail," he insisted, turning in my arms to look at me, his eyes intense and determined. "I never meant to imply that you were anything less than fully capable. My fear has *nothing* to do with your abilities and everything to do with how lost I'd be if you ever got hurt." He buried a hand in my hair, running his thumb along my jaw. "I know you're capable and I love that about you. I even enjoy the knowledge," he continued with a little bit of a smile, "that you would handily beat me in a fight. But life is an unpredictable mess. People don't always fight fair. Mistakes and miscalculations are bound to happen. None of us are invincible. But when the moment came, you didn't fail. You beat Morley. You got Elise out. You did that."

I smiled at his kindness and understanding, wanting nothing more than to kiss him, but it occurred to me that we were seated rather uncomfortably on a horse with two other men behind us.

Also, our horse had stopped moving.

"We should probably keep going," I said instead of attacking his mouth the way I wished to.

He glanced behind us and gave himself a little shake. "Right." Still he took just a moment to press a kiss to my mouth before turning forward and urging the horse ahead.

I looked over my shoulder at Falstone and Johnny, who had both stopped their own mounts, and who were both looking pointedly away from us.

Kind of them to do what they could to give us space and privacy. No wonder I admired these men.

"What time is it?" I asked as we neared Sutton Manor.

"There's several hours yet before dawn," Falstone answered.

We rode into the yard under the silver light of half a moon, with the night bugs making their noises. The house was quiet, lovely, serene under the stars. No lamps lit the windows.

My brow furrowed in confusion.

Falstone swung down from his horse. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. It's just...I expected a troop of hysterical females to run out the moment we returned." I remembered all too well how I had felt waiting for Falstone to return Cecily to us. I'd been thirteen, useless and inconsolable, wondering what was happening to her, if I would ever see her again.

Granted, she'd been gone for days. I'd been gone less than one.

"Ah," Falstone said in understanding. "That's my doing. When Johnny found me, I chose not to tell Cecily."

"Or the princess," Johnny added.

"Oh," I said, surprised but also not. "Good. Good. I'm glad they didn't have to worry." The more I thought about it, the more true it was. They were each growing babies that needed their mothers to rest and not work themselves into hysterics. They had Seraphina and Miles who needed attentive mothers, not distraught messes. "Good." This time the word came out on a relieved sigh, and with it came all of my exhaustion, all of the turmoil, and when Hunter dismounted and reached to help me down, I fell into his arms, trusting that he'd catch me and keep me safe.

I'm not certain why we ended up staying in the stables. Perhaps that's simply where Hunter was used to going. Perhaps the men didn't want to disturb those inside the house. Either way, I fell asleep in a pile of straw, my cloak wrapped around me, as the three men tended to their horses. Their low voices and the occasional nicker of a horse was soothing. I knew I wasn't alone. The smell of horses and the soft glow of the lantern they lit assured me that I wasn't inside a dark and tiny space, with barely enough room to breathe.

I woke up slowly, comfortably. I think it was the warmth. The belly of the beast had been cold and hard. Now I was warm and surrounded by softness. My cloak, the straw beneath me.

And Hunter.

It took me a while to realize that he was there too. I was curled into his chest, my forehead tucked beneath his chin, his arm draped over me. One of my hands was even clutching the fabric of his shirt.

I blinked my eyes open. The light was changing to a dim golden glow, indicating that the sun was breaking over the horizon, making the air hazy.

I lifted my head and propped myself up on one elbow, taking in the quietness of space, the dust floating in the dim beams of light that filtered through the walls.

Hunter stirred next to me, opening his eyes to look up at me. He took his time, letting his eyes focus, then lifted a hand to my forehead, running his fingers over my hair and down my disheveled braid. His hands came away with a bit of straw in his hands. "Now you're the one with straw in your hair."

I was able to smile then, appreciating his quiet teasing. "You slept on a pile of straw with me," I pointed out.

He lifted a shoulder to his ear. "You were sleeping peacefully. I didn't want to move you, but I didn't want to leave you alone either."

"I'm surprised Falstone and Johnny allowed that."

He closed his eyes, letting out a hum of contentment. "I told them I would take care of you. Maybe they trust me too much."

"I'm glad for it." I laid my head back down and closed my eyes. "Thank you," I whispered.

His lips pressed to the top of my head. "You're welcome. But I doubt we'll be left in peace much longer. The other stable hands will start their work soon. And as soon as Sir James and Falstone return from the village—"

"Sir James knows?" I asked, surprised.

He chuckled a little. "I'm surprised you didn't wake up when he came out. He'd noticed Falstone's absence and came out to see what happened. Then he joined Falstone on his trek to see the magistrate. They should be back soon, and when they return, they'll tell the princess and Cecily what happened to you."

I let out a sigh. "I should get up and get to the kitchen then," I said, my eyes still closed. "So they know I'm unhurt."

His hand ran from my shoulder down my side until it rested on my hip. My heart jumped in response. "*Are you unhurt?*" he asked.

"Just a few scrapes and bruises." The way his hand tightened on my hip made me want to scoot closer, but I held back. Now wasn't the time to think about his lips brushing against mine. There was work to be done, and I was determined not to be caught kissing by the other stable hands when they wandered in. I wanted normalcy.

I wanted more time with Hunter as well, but there would be chances for that later. I opened my eyes and pushed myself up. "We both have work to do."

He smiled up at me. "You're right," he conceded, then stood and offered me his hands, pulling me to my feet. "In that case"—he wrapped his arms around my waist—"I shall see you at breakfast"—he kissed my cheek—"and lunch"—he kissed my other cheek—"and then dinner." He left a lingering kiss on my forehead.

And I smiled.

20

He walked me back to the house, only leaving once I was within the safety of my kitchen.

The warm and quiet kitchen was a haven. I took a deep breath, soaking in the sense of home, then I dove into my duties, anxious for movement and work and distraction despite the bone-deep tiredness that I felt.

A noise from the hallway caught my attention and I watched as the kitchen door swung open and a bed-rumpled but frantic-looking Beatrice looked about the room. The moment her eyes fell on me, she took a heaving breath, pressing a hand to her bosom. "Child!" she said, looking almost weak with relief before stumbling toward me. "What did I tell you?!" She yanked me into her embrace, her arms too tight. "*I told* you it was dangerous. *I begged* you not to go."

"I'm sorry, Auntie," I said, knowing there was nothing I could say to justify the fact that I'd gone looking for trouble.

She pushed me away from her so that she could look at me as she ran her hands over my arms and across my shoulders, checking for injuries. "They found you, then?"

"Yes. They found me, and not a minute too soon." I swallowed down the lingering fear that her softness brought out. "I'd gotten myself into quite a scrape."

She captured me in her embrace again, weeping audibly, which had the unfortunate effect of causing a few of my own tears to fall.

Eventually, I had to extricate myself. "Did you sleep in the sickroom all night?" I asked as I swiped at my wet cheeks.

"Yes." She dabbed at her face with her apron. "I sat in there, waiting for Hunter and the others to return, but I suppose I worried myself to sleep." She placed her hands on her hips and looked at me. Then she shook her head as her tears started again. "What happened to you?" she asked in a whisper. "Was it those brothers? Tell me what happened."

I gave her one tight hug. "I can't talk about it right now. And you shouldn't think on it either. I'm all right. I'm home. And we both have work to do." She was about to protest, but I stalled her. "I will tell you later, just...give me a little time. Just a little."

Her worried eyes told me she was desperate for answers, but my plea must have convinced her of my fragile state, because she reluctantly agreed and went to start her own day after pressing a kiss to my forehead.

Nellie joined me soon after and didn't once look at me askance. Several other servants found their way in and out of the kitchen and none said a thing or looked as though they suspected anything unusual at all. Apparently, the majority of the Sutton Manor residents had no inkling of what had happened last night, and I was grateful for the reprieve.

Then Falstone and Sir James walked in the back door.

I held my breath.

Sir James didn't waste time on pleasantries. "We spoke with Magistrate Phillips and went with him to the camp, but the Wolfe brothers were gone and everyone there claims to have no memory of them

or the incident.”

My shoulders sank and my brow set in anger.

“Phillips says this isn’t uncommon. The travelers that come through for the festivals tend to keep to themselves and not cause trouble. But if there is a confrontation with the law, they close ranks and protect one another.”

“So...” I swallowed. “They’re just out there, somewhere.”

“Yes. But on the bright side, their wagon makes them particularly identifiable and the likelihood of them returning here is very low. They won’t want to risk coming up against the law.”

I took several moments to let that sink in, only vaguely aware of Nellie and Miriam, who had both gone utterly still. Then I turned back to the counter and continued with my meal preparations—measuring honey and adding it to the batter in front of me.

“I’m sorry, Emeline,” Falstone spoke for the first time.

I looked up at him and faked a smile. “It’s fine. Thank you both for everything.”

“Emeline,” Sir James said. He was looking at me in earnest. “Are you well?”

His concern was touching, but I couldn’t hide my grimace. “I will be” was the best I could do.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “for all of this.”

“You are certainly not to blame.”

He gave a wan smile then took a breath. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said as though he needed anyone’s permission to go anywhere, “I’m going to go have an uncomfortable conversation with my wife.”

His trepidation as he left almost pulled a real smile from me.

Falstone opened the back door. “I’ll check on you later,” he said and closed the door behind him.

I could feel Nellie and Miriam’s curiosity, but they must have sensed my reluctance to speak, because both held their peace.

The moment Sir James told his wife was heard throughout the entire house. After chastising her husband at a volume that was easily heard from the kitchens as she made her way through the house, she burst in, demanding answers—from Sir James, from Beatrice, and finally from me.

She was just forcing me into a chair when the back door opened and a panicked-looking Cecily waddled in, little Miles on her hip.

After being set upon and smothered by Cecily, I suggested that we all get some tea, hoping that it might calm the nerves of my little adopted family.

Marilee ordered James to take Miles up to the nursery to play with Seraphina under the watchful eye of the nurse. Then she insisted I sit while she made the tea, which of course Beatrice would not allow, forcing the heavy-laden princess to take a seat while she took on the task instead.

I breathed deep, more than a little terrified to rehash the dark experience which already haunted me, clinging to my shoulders like a weighted black cloak. I told them everything, answered every question. I watched them cry. I cried myself. I hated the way my voice shook, and it was embarrassing to tell of my own foolishness and inadequacies. Yet, while they each were upset that I had risked too much, they somehow found it in themselves to praise me for my bravery and action.

The story took so long that I had to leave the table and continue my tale from behind the counter as I prepared breakfast. Miriam worked alongside me, her movement slowing any time my tale became more perilous. She kept peeking over at me from behind her red curls but did not comment or interrupt. Nellie too came and went from the dining room. Her eyes were curious and worried, but she continued with her work, eventually leaving to retrieve milk from the barn.

At the end of the telling, I was wrung out, and yet the weight of the ordeal was somehow lighter now that I'd spoken it aloud.

The women continued to hover but eventually had to go about their own days. Cecily retrieved Miles from upstairs and then came back through the kitchen, stopping to pin me with a look.

"What is it?" I asked, knowing she wouldn't leave before she said her piece, and that it probably wouldn't be something I wanted to hear.

"Perhaps this isn't the time to mention it, but now that Hunter has quite literally saved you from a ghastly fate, are you going to admit that there is something between you?"

I laughed. Oh glory, it felt good to laugh.

Cecily's concern melted from her face, replaced by a knowing smile. "I'll take that as a yes." She pulled me into one last hug, having to pry Miles's hands from my braid when she pulled back, then let herself out.

"Good morning, Miriam," she said as she stepped out.

"Morning," Miriam said from outside the door, allowing Cecily to pass before coming inside, milk pails in hand. She closed the door behind her, looking more unsure than I'd seen her in weeks. "I'm glad you're all right," Miriam said, her eyes wide and worried.

"Me too," I said, trying to give her a smile.

As I allowed the steady beating of batter to soothe my mind, I was able to think back on the ordeal and see not only the peril, but also the triumph. When the moment had come, when it had truly counted, I'd taken on Morley Wolfe and won, allowing me not only the opportunity to leave with my friends, but also to free Elise from an imprisonment that I believed was much deeper and more painful than just a short time spent in that awful hold.

I worked through the morning, then through lunch. Hunter had come in to each meal, of course, and he'd watched me with more worry than anyone should be obligated to feel. He didn't stay, likely because he saw how busy I was, but he took a moment to put a hand to my back and tell me goodbye each time he left. My movements were slower than usual, my mind not fully on the tasks at hand.

Once lunch was finished and Nellie had brought all the dishes and utensils from the dining room, I stood leaning against one counter, staring at the mound of cleaning that needed to be done.

Nellie put a hand on my arm. "Go" was all she said.

The ghost of a chuckle passed my lips. "Where? There's work to be done."

"Let me take care of it. Miriam will be back soon to help, and no one is going to begrudge you a break."

I knew that, but it felt wrong.

"Go," she said again. "Go rest. Go for a walk. Go...talk to that man of yours." She grinned at me. I rolled my eyes. "Why is everyone interested in my love life?"

She gave me a sad smile. "He looked beside himself with worry. Go let him make you feel better."

I protested a bit more, but in the end, I was too tired and too in need of a hug to argue. So I allowed her to shoo me out the door.

My eyes were fixated on my feet as I walked toward the stables. It seemed best to keep careful watch of where my feet landed so that I wouldn't stumble.

Hunter's call of "Em!" finally got me to raise my head. He was jogging toward me, a pitchfork abandoned behind him. He reached me and set both hands on my shoulders before running them down to my hands. "Did something happen?"

I shook my head. "I was cast from my kitchen. Apparently I'm not much use there right now." I

made an attempt at a smile, but the world seemed to be tugging me down.

Hunter pulled me to him, allowing me to rest my head against his chest. "You do look exhausted."

"Aren't you?" I asked into his shirt. "You didn't get any more sleep than I did."

He pulled back and gave a little shrug. "A little. Why?" A teasing glint in his eyes caught my attention. "Are you suggesting we should both take a nap? Perhaps we can find an obliging pile of straw in the stables to rest on."

His teasing chased away a bit of my melancholy. "As tempting as that is, I'd rather return this." I held up the pretty painted bowl that I'd kept stowed in the pocket of my cloak since retrieving it the night before. "Though..." I paused as I frowned in thought. "I don't want to *walk* to Mr. Tennsworth's house."

"I can remedy that. Come on." He took my hand, leading me into the stables and stopping in front of the third stall. "Darling here needs to be exercised."

He saddled the horse in short order and soon enough we were riding under the canopy of trees. Hunter held the reins with one hand and used the other to brush his fingers up and down my arm. It felt nice, but I sensed that it was something he did more out of nerves than anything.

"Shouldn't you use two hands to ride?" I asked even though I knew very well that he could ride with one.

His hand stopped then settled around my own. "Does it bother you?"

"I'm just wondering why."

"I just... I don't know how to make it better." There was a slight tremor in his tone.

"Make what better?"

"Everything that happened to you. I want to help, but I've no idea what to do for you. So I suppose this is my way of offering comfort." He ran his hand up my arm again.

"It's nice," I admitted. And it *was* comforting—a constant, steady reminder that he was there with me, that he *did* care.

We crossed the stream, passed by Bridgefield, and arrived at Mr. Tennsworth's door in short order. Hunter helped me slide to the ground but stayed atop the horse, allowing me to go into Mr. Tennsworth's house on my own.

I knocked and let myself in. When the old groundskeeper saw me, he sat up, his face lit with worry and happiness and relief. He reached his hand out to me, gesturing me forward. "Come here, my dear, foolish girl. Johnny told me what happened."

I went, falling into his kind embrace. He kissed my head multiple times, then pulled back so he could look me in the eye. "You should not have put yourself in danger," he said with a stern shake of his head.

"I'm sorry I frightened you."

It was clear by his jerky movements and misty eyes that I had frightened him.

"But," I said as I pulled the bowl from my pocket, "I have slain the beast and retrieved your treasure."

A tear slid down his cheek as he took the bowl in hand. He swallowed a few times as he caressed the colors. "It was her favorite."

"I know." I gave him another hug. "You look exhausted," I commented.

"Well, of course I am. I've been worrying all night about you," he said gruffly as he wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry."

He nodded, accepting my apology.

"I'll let you rest," I said. "Thank you for looking out for me."

"You know I always will. Now, go on. Let an old man have his rest." He shooed me away with a smile.

I let myself out, grateful that he was so happy with the return of his item. Touched that his first concern had been for me.

Hunter's smile was subtle and soft as I approached. He pulled me up onto the horse with him without a word and turned it toward home. "Where to now?"

"The stables?" I suggested, looking over my shoulder at him.

He shook his head. "I'm not ready to go back to work yet."

I thought for a moment, then agreed. "I'm not either. I'd rather sit by the stream."

"That's an excellent idea." He snugged his arm around my waist once more and we made our way back to the woods.

We stopped when we reached the stream, Hunter dismounting first and then reaching up to help me down. Instead of just assisting in my descent, he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me against him as he slowly lowered my feet to the ground.

Once my feet were firmly settled, neither of us moved. He looked down at me, his hands still pressed to my back, while I looked up at him, waiting and hoping.

He dipped his head just a little, but then stopped, studying me with concern curving his brow. So I slipped into bravery the way I slipped into fighting britches and fisted my hands into the front of his shirt, pulling him down to me.

He came willingly, and I got a glimpse of his smile before he pressed his mouth to mine, gentle and exploratory. He was being careful with me, which gave me plenty of time to savor, to appreciate how it felt to have his warm hands pressed to my back and his soft lips nudging against mine one second and brushing against them the next. I pushed my fingers into his unruly curls and let the darkness of the past day fall away, slipping instead into the utter bliss that Hunter's closeness provided.

After several glorious moments, he pulled back just a little, letting his nose trail along my cheek as I tried to catch my breath.

"Was that another attempt to make everything better?" I teased.

He groaned into my neck, his arms tightening around me. "No. That was me being selfish."

I pulled back, forcing him to look at me. "I guess it works both ways then."

He smiled, gave my lips one more tender kiss and then took my hand, guiding me over to a tree. He sat with his back against it and urged me to sit between his knees and lean back against his chest. I happily complied, taking his arms and wrapping them around myself like a blanket.

He sighed into my hair and for several moments we soaked up the peace offered up by this beautiful spot. The leaves were still, the buzzing of insects a quiet hum barely discernible over the babbling of the stream.

He pressed his lips to my hair more. "I love you, you know."

I closed my eyes, letting the warmth of his words wash over and through me, lighting up the darkest corners of my soul and warming me to my toes. "And I love you," I whispered.

"I've never been more terrified than I was last night," he murmured into my hair. "I thought I'd lost you."

"You can't be rid of me that easily."

"How can you joke? I was nearly paralyzed with fear last night, and I wasn't the one who'd been taken."

"I'm fine," I said, letting my eyes close, comfortable in his arms.

I felt his chin resting on my head shake back and forth.

I maneuvered my head so it could rest on his shoulder. “I’m not saying it wasn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened to me—it was. And I’m not saying that I’ve forgotten it, or that I won’t be terrified tonight when the sun sets and I have to face the darkness. But right now”—I breathed deeply—“in this moment, I am well.”

He rested his chin on my shoulder. “How can that be?”

How could it be? I supposed now that I considered it, it came down to several things. “Because I’m here in this place, with people who care for me—and I have you here.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I’ve spent the last five years fighting to take care of myself. I wanted to be certain that I would never have to depend on anyone else. But that’s not true, is it?”

“I don’t know, I think you’ve done a remarkable job of taking care of yourself. You certainly showed that Wolfe brother what you’re capable of. I kept waiting to see if there was a moment where I could jump in and help, but I knew that any interference from me would make things worse. You were brilliant.”

I smiled at his kindness. “Yes, but when it mattered, I wasn’t enough by myself. You all helped me. Falstone cut me free. You helped me cut Elise out of that wagon. I’m home and safe because I had the three of you looking out for me.”

He pressed his lips to my shoulder. “We all need help sometimes.”

“Yes. None of us can rely entirely on ourselves. None of us should have to. And I’m glad you were there for me when I needed you.” I sat up and turned in his arms. “Because I did need you, and—” I paused, calling on my bravery. “And I think I will continue to need you,” I confessed.

He brushed my hair aside. “I’ve known I needed you for quite some time.”

The little bundle of nerves that had tightened in my chest let go. “Really?”

“Yes.” He grinned—unembarrassed, unapologetic. “Now, if only we could put all of your troubled thoughts onto a fairy boat and sail them down the stream,” he mused. “We could, you know. I’ve become quite adept at fairy construction.”

“As lovely a thought as that is,” I said, turning to lean back on him once more, “I’d rather just sit here and let you keep them at bay.”

“I can do that,” he said, tightening his arms around me. “I can be your soft place. Anytime you need peace or rest, I’ll be here.”

His declaration filled my whole chest with warmth. “I want to be that for you too.”

“You already are,” he whispered into my hair.

And I smiled.

The End

THE SWINDLER'S DAUGHTER

(Robin Hood Reimagined)
Tales of Winberg: Book Three

Prologue

Before

I'd nearly been caught today, picking the pocket of a man at the festival. Luckily, when he'd turned and looked straight at me, all he saw was an innocent ten-year-old girl. Papa always told me that my honest face was my biggest asset. I'd mastered looking wide-eyed and curious when I was four.

Unfortunately, Papa had seen today's near miss and made me work longer hours to make up for the fact that a mark had nearly caught me. And even after I'd climbed into bed dead tired, I couldn't fall asleep. Papa had met some men, and they were talking around the fire, bursting into loud, annoying laughter each time I was on the verge of sleep. When I finally did drift off, it was a fitful sleep. I kept having dreams about being caught. A mark would reach out and grab my arm before I could run away. Or I would make a clean grab, only to be confronted by a lawman, which was even worse than being caught by a mark. Or my father would be shaking my shoulder, screaming at me for not being careful enough.

He just kept shaking and shaking.

"Miri!" someone hissed in my ear.

That's when I realized the shaking wasn't a dream. I groaned and rolled over, trying to shove my brother away. I knew it had to be Hunter. He was the only one who called me Miri.

"Go away," I muttered, in no mood to wake up when I knew it wasn't morning.

A hand clamped over my mouth. "You have to be quiet," Hunter warned in a whisper, and suddenly I was wide awake. Hunter wouldn't risk scaring me for no reason, and the panic in his voice was definitely scaring me.

I looked over at him, but there was nothing but shadows inside our peddler's wagon. I could hear Hunter's shallow breathing, along with my father's snoring that came from the other end of the wagon. I finally nodded so Hunter would know that I understood.

He slowly removed his hand. "We have to leave, Miri."

"Leave where?" I asked in my quietest whisper.

"Just help me gather some things and come with me. I'll explain later."

"But where are we going?" I asked as I pushed myself up from my pallet, rubbing at my eyes.

"Shh," he warned again. Then he sighed. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Of course I do." That had never been a question. I'd always known I could rely on my brother. He was almost five years older than I was, and he had always taken care of me. He made sure I got

something to eat when Papa forgot about such things. When Papa got upset, he took the blame even if it was my fault.

"Then come outside with me. Make sure you grab your shoes and shawl."

My face scrunched in confusion, but I pushed my blankets off and got up to do as he asked. Soon Hunter was lifting the latch on the door, then he jumped out before helping me to the ground. He kept quiet, closing the door again in complete silence before strapping a large pack to his back. Then he took my hand and pulled me away from our camp.

I wanted to ask him where we were going, but I held my tongue. He'd promised to explain, so I would wait until he thought it was time.

We found the narrow, rutted path that led to the main road and walked along it. And still Hunter didn't talk; he just kept walking farther and farther from the wagon, from our home. From Papa.

I gulped and couldn't keep my questions in anymore. "Are we running away, Hunter?"

"Yes," he said, his pace quick and steady.

"Are we running away from Papa?"

"Yes."

My thoughts tripped over the idea for only a moment. It was easy to know how I felt about it. It was scary, but also a little exciting. My stomach felt uncomfortable. "Who will take care of us?" I asked. Papa was always grumbling about how hard it was to take care of us, how lucky we were to have him. Even though I didn't feel lucky all the time, I figured he would know better than I would.

"Me," Hunter answered. "I'm going to take care of both of us."

"We don't have a wagon to live in."

"I know, Miri, but trust me. It will be better this way. It will be safer."

"How?"

Hunter's steps slowed, and he finally stopped and turned to look at me. I could just make out his features in the light of the half-moon. "Do you know what Papa was doing with those men around the fire?"

My shawl slipped down one arm and I impatiently pulled it up to my shoulder again. "He was trying to strike a deal. He's always striking deals." That was what my father called it when he conned someone out of their money. "What does it matter?"

"I think this deal is going to go bad," he said, his voice tight and his eyes flitting from one dark tree to the next like he was expecting trouble. "It sounded worse than the others. We can't risk getting caught when he gets caught." He started walking again, grabbing my hand and tugging me along behind him.

"Papa never gets caught," I pointed out.

He made a noise of disgust in his throat. "Well, maybe he should."

I thought about what he was suggesting, about how it would be different. It was scary to think of trying to live without Papa's protection, without a home... "Does this mean we'll get to keep everything we take?" I asked, trying to look on the bright side. "Will we get to decide what to spend our money on?"

Hunter heaved a sigh. "Yes, we'll get to decide. But, Miri," he said as he suddenly stopped and turned to me. "We're not taking things anymore."

My brow furrowed and I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to find work for us to do. We'll find someone who will pay us a wage to do chores.

I'm done being a festival rat. We're going to *earn* our money now."

One side of my face screwed up in confusion. "We were earning it before. We worked hard for the money we took." That's what life as a festival rat meant. We traveled from village to village with the other peddlers and performers. We sold our wares. Papa swindled any mark he could find while Hunter and I picked pockets.

Hunter groaned then turned and kept walking. "It's not the same. I don't want to be a thief anymore, Miri. We are *not* going to be thieves anymore."

I stayed quiet, but my frown remained. I didn't understand the difference. Papa had trained me to do a job, to earn money. And I'd been good at it. How could I help Hunter earn money if I couldn't do what I was good at?

Chapter 1

Seven Years Later

It irked me that I found Rowan attractive, but laws, I couldn't help it. And those few moments here and there when it seemed like he was flirting with me didn't help matters. He was overly confident, bordering on arrogant. So it was horribly distracting when he did things like this, stepping up behind me, speaking so close to my ear as he used his hands to adjust the grip I had on my bow or the direction my shoulders were facing.

Horribly distracting.

"Raise your arm just a bit," he directed.

His words hit the back of my neck, and I instinctively rolled my shoulder away from him as a shudder ran down my spine.

"Everything all right?" he asked, and I could hear the smile in his voice. He was teasing me. I threw my elbow back, catching him in the ribs.

He let out a short groan but turned it into a laugh as he stepped back.

I looked over my shoulder with a glare. "Do you enjoy riling me?"

He straightened, looking not nearly as hurt as I wished him to be, a wicked grin fixed in place. Then he gave a shrug and shook his blond waves out of his eyes. "A little."

I rolled my eyes. Why could he never be serious? "Do I need to find someone else to teach me?" Not that I would. He may be arrogant, but there was something exciting about being around him.

"Do you know many chaps who have the skill and time to teach you how to use a bow and arrow?" he asked.

"I'm sure I could find another," I said with a stubborn tilt of my head.

"One who lives close enough that you can walk over for your lessons?" Now he was grinning.

Curse him. My threat was empty, and he knew it just as well as I did. He knew there was no one else to teach me. I was a servant, for heaven's sake, with little free time and limited interactions with anyone outside of Sutton Manor and its grounds. Rowan was the son of Sutton's gamekeeper. He had the skills I needed in a teacher, and he lived here on the property. He was also easy to look at.

When I'd first approached him several months ago, I'd been so nervous and excited—so preoccupied with the challenge of learning the bow and arrow—that I'd been able to ignore the attraction I felt—at least for a few weeks. But the more we'd interacted, and the more comfortable he

became around me, the more difficult it was to ignore how my insides squirmed with every look, every smile. He was arrogant, yes, but he was also sweet and charming. Dangerously charming with his blue eyes and his easy grin. That charm was what kept me from flirting in return. I'd spent my younger years peddling my father's wares at festivals among the other riffraff. I knew all too well how charm could be used to manipulate, so if that was his game, he'd get nowhere with me.

I heaved a sigh and rolled my eyes over to him. "While I do appreciate you being willing to take a bit of time each week to teach me, our time would probably be better spent focusing on my shooting instead of how you can distract me from it."

"Right. Of course." He cleared his throat as though deliberately falling out of the role of charmer and into the role of teacher. "Let's see how you're doing with your speed."

I pressed my lips, hating these little tests. He claimed it was to measure my progress, but that was a lie.

He stepped up beside me, his own bow in hand. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"Three. Two. One. Draw."

We both drew, nocked, pulled back, and shot. He was twice as fast as I was. I sighed. "Laws," I cursed under my breath. Even out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Rowan was grinning.

The reason for these tests was so that he could show off.

"You're getting faster," he commented.

"But not fast enough?" I asked, anticipating criticism.

He shrugged. "I grew up with a bow in my hand. If a few months of practice could put you on pace with me, that would be a sad assessment of my skills."

I frowned. That observation sounded strangely logical and lacked his usual arrogance.

"What do you mean to do with these skills anyway?" he asked as he rolled another arrow between his thumb and fingers.

I shrugged.

"Will you join the competitions like Emeline?"

"I doubt it," I said as I studied the spot where my arrow had sunk into the target. It was on the very edge, barely hanging on. At this point, I could manage a bit of speed or a bit of accuracy, but not both. "I'm more interested in having the skills than in showing them off."

"You think Emeline is a show-off?"

I turned to look at him. "That is not what I said," I corrected, worried that he would go off and start a rumor that I was insulting my brother's wife behind her back. I loved Emeline.

He smiled. "I was kidding."

"Well, please don't. I like Emeline very much and would hate for her to hear otherwise."

He gave a single nod. "Understood. Precision this time. Ready?"

I fumbled to draw an arrow from my quiver and ended up missing the target entirely.

His cheeky grin made me glower. He truly was arrogant.

Even so, he was a good teacher when he wanted to be. Patient, precise, willing to explain then demonstrate, then explain again if necessary. He seemed genuinely happy to teach me and never seemed annoyed or inconvenienced by my questions.

Plus, he was incredibly skilled. I suppose growing up as the gamekeeper's son had a hand in that, but it was obvious that not only did he enjoy shooting, he also put a lot of time into honing his skills.

When our time was up, he set his bow aside and held his hand out toward me. My mind went blank. Did he want me to place my hand in his? A flush rushed to my cheeks. Then he spoke. “The quiver,” he said, nodding toward my shoulder.

I winced, giving myself a swift internal reprimand for thinking that Rowan would do anything so romantic as wishing to take my hand. Laws, I wished I could control the way I responded to him. I took the quiver from where it hung at my back and handed it over.

When I’d purchased my own bow, I’d only had enough money for a handful of arrows to practice with, and Rowan had been kind enough to offer his own for these practice sessions. He made his own arrows and thus had a plethora of them.

“‘Til next time,” he said with a cocky turn of his mouth, then he slung the two quivers over one shoulder and started toward his cottage, cutting through the herb garden that he maintained. Rowan would no doubt take over for his father as Sir James Sutton’s gamekeeper one day, but his principal duties for now were growing and tending to the herbs that were gathered and used for healing at the manor house.

Once I’d pried my eyes away from his swaggering retreat, I took up my own bow and walked in the direction of the manor. The Lockley cottage was in the woods that separated Sutton land from Bridgefield.

As I left the trees, I heard the call of “Ho there, Miri.”

I looked up to see Johnny striding toward me, a staff propped on his enormous shoulder. Johnny was tall, broad, and muscular with an open, friendly disposition.

“Hello, Johnny.” He was one of the few aside from my brother who’d taken to calling me Miri. He and I had an easy friendship. We’d simply gotten along from the moment I started working at Sutton Manor a year ago. I noted the dirt caked onto the knees of his trousers. “Keeping yourself tidy and clean, I see.”

He paused to strike a pose. “Of course. I always strive to be a proper gent.”

“It looks like you were beaten. Has someone finally figured out how to best you with a staff?” I asked, knowing he’d just come from training.

“No, but going up against Falstone’s sword is a proper challenge.”

“What about Tyson and Oliver?” I asked, since they were only a little younger than Johnny.

He grinned, knowing very well that his sheer size gave him an unfair physical advantage over the others. “I’m afraid neither has ever managed to beat me, but they give one another a challenge, so they’re always improving.”

“And Gretchen?”

He heaved a sigh. “I thought she’d tire of playing with swords, but if I’m honest, she’s still better than Ansel is.”

Gretchen was Johnny’s sister and the youngest of those who trained with Falstone. Ansel was older than she was, but only by half a year. They were both twelve and had become the best of friends. “I look forward to the day she can beat you,” I teased.

He let out a laugh. “That would be a sight, wouldn’t it?” He eyed my bow. “Rowan treating you all right?”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s arrogant.”

He let out a deep bark of laughter. “Yes, but the man can shoot.”

“He can,” I conceded. “And he is a good teacher,” I admitted grudgingly.

“Glad to hear it.” He grinned. “We’ll make a warrior of you yet.”

I shook my head with a smile and waved as he walked away toward his own home on the neighboring estate. Johnny worked at Bridgefield, the house owned but rarely used by the sovereign Duke of Winberg.

I knew our little corner of the world was odd. Servants didn’t usually train with weapons, but it was Johnny who had started it all. He’d had aspirations as a boy for being a spy, and when Princess Marilee’s guard, Falstone, had offered to train him up a bit, plenty of others had fallen in line. Even I had toyed with the idea of learning the sword.

Then I’d seen the archery competition at the festival last year. And I’d fallen in love. Archery was just so elegant compared to the sword, and from that moment on, I’d scrimped and saved bit by bit, stashing away a portion of my earnings each month until I had enough to buy my own bow.

That bow was my most prized possession, and I was eager to learn how to wield it with speed and precision.

After my archery lesson, I returned to the kitchen to find the cook, Emeline, humming as she baked. She hummed a lot lately, ever since she’d married my brother.

“Hello,” I greeted.

She turned to me, her face bright with contentment. “How was your lesson?”

“He says I’m getting better.” No need to mention the way his teasing caused my ribs to tighten.

“Of course you are. You’ve taken to it like a duck to water.”

I stashed my bow in the back corner of the kitchen then set about the task of washing dishes.

Emeline continued to hum, and when she pulled her pastries from the oven, filling the air with their sweet scent, I realized what day it was. “Having tea with Her Highness?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking at me with a little crease of worry in her brow. “I hope it won’t create too much extra work for you.”

I gave a little shake of my head. “That’s what you always say. And I don’t mind a little extra work.”

“I still feel bad for leaving my duties to you,” she said as she arranged biscuits in a napkin-lined basket, and set the still-warm pastries on a tray.

“They’re my duties too, and I can handle it.” I knew that it wasn’t the extra duties that truly bothered her. Emeline had never gotten over feeling bad that she and the lady of the house were on friendly terms. Not that Princess Marilee wasn’t friendly to everyone. She was, which was odd enough, but the oddness was compounded by the continued ritual of taking tea with her cook, housekeeper, and former lady’s maid. Emeline, Beatrice, and Cecily had all been with the princess since she’d married her first husband. Their bond made sense considering their history and what they’d been through together, but I also understood why Emeline felt conspicuous because of it.

“Here,” I said, reaching for a plate covered in sugar-dusted goodness. “I’ll help you take these up.”

She acquiesced and we made our way out to the veranda, setting the baked goods on the side table. This was to be the princess’s last hurrah with her three good friends before she and Sir James left for nearly three months. Now that baby Gabriella was old enough to travel, Marilee was determined to have a good, long visit with her family in Dalthia.

We would become a household without a master or mistress. It would be very odd, having the

house full of no one but servants. There would surely be less work, more free time, and more freedom in general. I loved Her Highness. I could truthfully say that I would miss her, but I was excited to experience such a reprieve.

I left Emeline to fuss over the arrangement of the pastries and made my way back through the house just as Her Highness was coming down the stairs with the nursemaid, Jane, trailing behind her. Jane carried Gabriella on one hip and held Seraphina's hand on her other side.

"We're going to Cecily's cottage so I can play with Miles," Seraphina chattered as she jumped from step to step.

"Yes, you are," Marilee assured her. "And Charles will be there as well."

"Gabby can play with him. They're both little."

"Too true," I heard Marilee agree as I slipped down the hall and back into the kitchen.

Instead of finding the kitchen empty, I found Hunter there, staring around at the pots and cutlery as if utterly confused. "Where is my wife?" my brother asked the moment I came in the door.

I smiled. "You enjoy saying that, don't you?"

"What? You mean referring to *my wife*?" A smile swept over his mouth as if he simply couldn't hold it back. "It never gets old."

"Well, *your wife* is having tea out on the veranda."

"Ah. That explains it. There's not much that pulls her away from this kitchen, and I knew she wasn't training." He looked me over. "I suppose you were doing your own training this morning?"

I nodded.

He reached out and tugged on one of my bright curls. "Soon all the women in my life will be able to beat me in a fight."

I snorted a laugh. "I could likely only hit you if you held very still and gave me several tries."

He picked up an apple and leaned back against the counter that sat beneath the window. "That may be the case now, but I'm sure it won't be for long. You still enjoy it?" He bit into the crisp apple.

Now I was the one grinning. "Very much."

"Good," he said around a thoughtful mouthful. "Do you get along with that Lockley boy well enough?"

I smirked at him. "I'm fairly certain *that Lockley boy* is as much a man as you are," I pointed out.

He smiled wide. "That's not saying much."

I snorted a laugh.

"Well," he said, pushing off the counter, "I suppose I'll be off. Tell Em I stopped by." He opened the back door.

"I will." I watched out the window as he walked toward the stables, happy that he was happy. He and Emeline had been married about six months. They were friends, confidants, lovers.

I envied them.

While Emeline was gone, I sank into the comfort of making bread, allowing the routine to relax me.

When Emeline returned with the tea tray in hand less than an hour later, I had moved on to dinner preparations.

"I'll go get the rest," I said, dusting off my palms before making my way out to the veranda where Princess Marilee and Cecily still sat. I did my best to be unobtrusive as I gathered the serving dishes from the side table.

“Why do you look so worried?” Cecily was asking Her Highness.

“Because I don’t enjoy being the bearer of bad news.” Princess Marilee let out a sigh. “It’s going to be Reeve,” she said carefully.

There was one long moment of tense silence. “He’s to be Murrwood’s new magistrate?” Cecily burst out, her voice hard with anger.

“Unfortunately,” Princess Marilee confirmed. “I realize he was only doing his job, but from what you’ve told me about your encounter with him, I can’t like that he’s the one taking over for Phillips.”

Cecily snorted. “No, indeed. He seems to take pleasure in violence, and he enjoys the power. He was more than happy to help the captain force my hand.” I saw her brow furrowed in consternation as I was leaving. “He’s a terrible choice for such a position.” Cecily’s indignant voice faded as I returned to the kitchen with my arms full.

So we were to have a new magistrate? And one that Her Highness did not approve of. It was difficult for me to imagine that it would change much about our lives. I’d spent so many years traveling, never a citizen of any specific town or village, that worrying about local politics still seemed strange. In the life of a peddler, lawmen were meant to be avoided and never trusted. So the idea of not trusting this new magistrate felt normal to me, and yet both Cecily and Princess Marilee seemed deeply concerned by it. I suppose it was just one more example of the way my early years made me different...

You can find [*The Swindler’s Daughter* on Amazon](#).

To My Readers

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Acknowledgements

I suppose I always knew that I'd get around to telling Emeline's story. She was a favorite of mine in *Saving Marilee*, and when I came up with the idea for the *Tales of Winberg series*, it made sense to turn her into my Little Red. I'm grateful I had the chance to bring her out of the shadows and help her find her voice. Though, in the process of helping her find her voice, I ended up making her a bit too feisty. My first version of this book portrayed her as so feisty that she came off as belligerent. No author wants to hear that their heroine is unlikable, but I'd much rather hear it during the editing phase than to hear it after it's published.

So, thank you, Leiana, for giving me a much-needed wake-up call. And thank you, Kimberly, for confirming that there was a problem when my ego didn't want to believe it. As always, my books are made so much better by the feedback of others, and I truly appreciate the time you put into critiquing my work.

Thank you, Jana, for editing (and then re-editing) my books so that they can reach their pretty, shiny potential.

Thank you to all my readers for loving my original world enough to want to return to it.

About the Author

I was born in Utah, but I migrated to Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia before settling in Idaho.

I love words. I always have. And though I dabbled in writing throughout school, becoming an author was never a goal of mine because I never imagined it would be possible. It took me seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-effective method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me.

I write clean romance because I love it. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving in ever can.

I love chocolate, *Into the Woods*, ocean waves, my husband, and my five littles. And I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment.

